

Spoiler Alert: *John 12:1-11*

Norwalk Christian Church, February 25, 2018, Lent 2B, Narrative Lectionary John Year (non-lectionary substitute text)

Before we go any further this morning, I need to stop now and announce, “Spoiler Alert”.

Perhaps you’re familiar with this phrase. It’s a term coined to refer to the announcement one should give when you’re about to ruin a critical plot line of a movie or book. For instance:

Spoiler Alert: At the end of Titanic, the boat hits an iceberg and sinks.

Spoiler Alert: Darth Vader--Luke’s Father. And Princess Leah...yup. Luke kissed his sister.

Spoiler Alert: Oh my goodness, can you believe what happened at the end of the new Black Panther movie...well, I better not spoil that one. It’s still in the theaters.

Perhaps our story this morning should’ve come with a “Spoiler Alert” label before Betsy ruined Lent for us.

Did you catch it? Right there, second Sunday of Lent, the Gospel of John ruins the ending. Curious about this Judas character--well, he’s about to betray Jesus. And, in case you feel any sympathy for Judas, this misdirected guy, think again. He’s been stealing from the common purse for years!

But on this night, as Jesus gathered with his closest friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, on this night in Bethany, no one knows for sure how it is going to end. Today, they have hope. Today, the story isn’t finished.

Though you can feel the storm clouds gathering, knowing that the religious leaders are organizing opposition against Jesus, Jesus is going to be okay, right? He’s been in situations like this before, and he always emerges, walking away on water or passing through an angry mob as if a ghost.

Jesus is going to be okay. Right?

And that’s when Mary comes back into the dining room. We didn’t even notice her quietly leave. She got a lost, terrified look in her eyes, like she’s looked death in the face.

And then, the plot twists: “Mary [takes] a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, [anoints] Jesus’ feet, and [wipes] them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.”

What is going on here?

Maybe you remember seeing this episode before, but perhaps you remember the details differently. This is one of the few stories in John's Gospel that shows up in the other three gospels...except John's story is very different.

When Mark told us the story, he set it in Bethany as well, but it all happens at Simon the Leper's house. Mary is never named. It's the same when Matthew tells the story.

When Luke tells us the story, it's at Simon's house, but he's not a leper, he's a Pharisee, and they're far from Bethany. We aren't told her name, but we are told she is "a woman from the city, a sinner," which has led many to believe she was a prostitute. Because of this people started associating Luke's unnamed woman with Mary Magdalene. In Luke's story, a debate breaks out about the appropriateness of this nefarious woman touching a holy man like Jesus.

And then we get John's story. The details are similar to Mark and Matthew, but John tells us her name.

This is Mary. Mary of Bethany. The well-known and respected Mary who was most likely a leader among the Jews. Mary, the sister of Lazarus. Mary, who said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Remember Mary?

And where are we? This isn't Simon the Leper's house or Simon the Pharisee's house. When John tells the story, we're in Lazarus' house.

After Mary anoints Jesus' feet, Judas protests (the one who is about to betray Jesus), "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" But he didn't mean it. Often like "thoughts and prayers" after a tragedy, Judas is saying holy words, but there is no meaning. He cares nothing about the poor. He wants the money for himself. He's stealing from the common purse. He's literally stealing money from Jesus to line his own pockets.

And Jesus responds, "Leave her alone. She bought [this perfume] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

And that's the story. What begins as a meal among friends, scared but hopeful, ends with the stench of death.

Thanks for spoiling the party, Mary.

So why did Mary do it? Did Jesus' feet stink?

In those days, if you anoint someone on the head, that is a sign of Victory. Kings were anointed on the head. The name “Messiah” literally means, “Anointed One.”

But anointing someone’s feet, that’s a different story. It is not a sign of victory, but of defeat. You don’t anoint someone’s feet with perfume unless...well, unless they’re dead. This is done to the deceased, as a way of showing reverence to the departed.

We may be sitting in hope, hoping that this time, too, Jesus will escape the plots to kill him. But Mary speaks symbolically, but definitively—he’s going to die. And she’s going to show him her love, while she can.

Sorry to spoil Holy Week for you.

But where, again, are we? Who’s house is this?

This is Lazarus’ house. You know Lazarus, the one who, just a few days ago, was dead. Dead, dead. Four days in the ground, dead. Already stinking, dead. It was a tragic story.

And Jesus shows up too late, but also just on time. Jesus isn’t big on predictable endings. He goes to the tomb of Lazarus, orders it to be opened, and declares, “Lazarus! Come out!” And Lazarus came out.

And then, Lazarus went home and threw a party. An “I’m not dead yet” party. Here we are in his house, and there he sits at the head of the table. Maybe he’s still a little fuzzy from the events of the last few days, but he’s there. Alive. Eating with his family and his closest friend.

It’s almost as if John has a wink in his eyes. Like there may be one small detail of Jesus’ story that he hasn’t told us, yet.

Because if a dead man can throw an “I’m not dead yet” party, then maybe this story isn’t over after all. Maybe we shall overcome, someday.

Perhaps you feel like your story is over. Like the ending is already predicted.

You’ve been told that you’re too young or too old. You’re not smart enough or good enough. The very things you wish to do are the things you do not do. You give love, but love doesn’t come back. You try, and it seems you’re always failing. The diagnosis is terminal. The fate is sealed. There is no hope; no plot twists. Just a predictable, perhaps even tragic ending.

Maybe you look at the world, and you’re just tired of having your hopes crushed. You’re tired of thinking--maybe this time things will go differently. Tired of holding nothing but thoughts and prayers, when change never comes and good never wins.

But take a look around. Look at where we are today! We are at Lazarus' house. And though the perfume filling the air declares that the one with whom we sit at the table will soon be killed...we're at the home of the man who was dead, but now lives.

As we leave this meal in Bethany, we quickly see that things start turning out just the way Mary said they would. The plot to kill Jesus intensifies. Later that week, Jesus gathers with his Disciples at another table, and Judas, after having his feet washed by Jesus, steals away in the night and betrays him.

And they arrest him.

And beat him.

And crucify him.

And bury him.

But then, but then... Well, I don't want to spoil the ending.