

**5th SUNDAY IN LENT**  
**April 7, 2019**

Text: John 12:1-8

Theme: Overcome with Gratitude

Last Sunday we studied the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* which could easily be renamed the *Parable of the Grateful Son*. On Wednesday we had our Lenten worship and Jenn offered a beautiful reflection on gratitude based on the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. She invited us to read the story from the perspective of the man who was beaten by robbers. How grateful he must have been when the kind Samaritan stopped and bandaged his wounds. How overcome with gratitude he must have been when this complete stranger put him on his own animal and then took him to an inn so he could recover fully from his injuries. And if that were not enough, he went ahead and paid the full amount for his care. He would be forever grateful for the compassion and generosity of this person he might never see again.

Gratitude seems to be a consistent theme throughout this Lenten season which is quite refreshing. Normally we spend these six weeks focusing on our sins and it leaves us depleted rather than encouraged. But our lessons have been pointing us to be thankful and that is good news and what is even better news is that it has become the hot topic in social media. Everyone is talking about starting a gratitude journal. It is the new thing! At the end of each day we are to physically write down on a sheet of paper our positive experiences and then we are to save them. Over a period of time we can go back and review what we wrote to refresh our memories and gain a better perspective on how life has been unfolding for us.

Based on all of the above I decided it would be a wonderful spiritual exercise to write a gratitude journal for Mary who in our gospel lesson for today is overcome with gratitude for Jesus. Our story today is not a parable but it is a real, live story about a woman who had a real, live encounter with Christ.

In order to capture the full impact of what Mary did for Jesus in John 12 we need to back up to John 11. In John 11 we find Lazarus sick and his sisters in distress.

Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus and they ask him to come and heal their brother, but Jesus did not get there in time and Lazarus died. Four days later Jesus arrived and it was too late except for the fact that this was Jesus and once on-site he raised Lazarus back to life. We can only assume that on that day Mary could not stop writing down her words of thanksgiving.

In the journal I would have written words that expressed my absolute joy that Christ gave me more time to be with my brother. It would make me consider how God gives us the gift of time and we should not squander it away. I would be forever thankful for all the people who came to us (before Jesus arrived) to console us as we mourned. And I would jot down how later that day those same people were so willing to roll the stone away as Jesus instructed. We all stood in disbelief that Lazarus came out.

But after the raising of Lazarus some days followed when it would have been much more difficult for Mary to conjure up words of gratitude. Some of those people who stood with Mary (as she grieved the loss of her brother) were also present when her brother was brought back to life. In fear, they left the scene believing that the Roman authorities would soon learn how powerful Jesus was and what a threat he was to them. In fear, they made the assumption that the Romans would come and destroy their holy places and nation. So in a private conversation, the high priest suggested it would be better to have one man die than to have the whole nation destroyed. From that day forward they planned to put Jesus to death and (as a result) Jesus could no longer walk openly among the people.

So what does one write in a gratitude journal on those days that are less than joyful? At the end of the day I would have written down that now that I knew the true cost of what Jesus did for my brother, I would be humbled by his sacrifice.

I would be grateful that in the midst of the threats against his life, Jesus found a place to stay among his disciples. He was safe for now. And when the invitation was sent for him to come to our house to have dinner with us he was able to accept. I would be grateful for another opportunity to be with Christ even if it was just for one night and for one meal.

In the midst of the joy Mary felt when her brother was raised from the dead and the humility she felt at the sacrifice it meant for Jesus, we now experience her reaction when Jesus entered her home for a celebratory dinner. Overcome with gratitude, Mary could not contain herself. Martha was busy in the kitchen and Lazarus was already at the table when she let her hair down, she let her guard down, and in silence she poured an expensive perfume all over the feet of Jesus and then wiped them with her hair.

What a day! In my journal I would express words of thanksgiving that Jesus was able to come when he had to be so cautious. Martha was willing to be in the kitchen and prepare the meal while I spent more time with Jesus. I would make a note to thank her after everyone left for the night. I would have written down how overwhelming it was to have Jesus dine with us after such a dramatic event and how easy it was to be overcome with emotion the minute he stepped into our home. I would be forever grateful that when Judas started to question my actions Jesus came to my defense and told him to leave me alone. Jesus understood me and the intentions of my heart.

Once I completed this spiritual exercise (using the story of Mary) I started my own gratitude journal. On Thursday I woke up and knew I had only one meeting (first thing in the morning) and the rest of the day was clear. I decided that I would make some home visits. From 10:30 am to 6:00 pm I went from one place to another and was filled with gratitude from start to finish.

At my first stop the memory of the person I went to see is not so great anymore but I am grateful that she has not lost her wonderful sense of humor. After that visit I saw a woman who is so steeped in Scripture that we spent most of our time in a mini-Bible study which was just awesome. As I traveled a distance to my next destination, I stopped along the way to eat my lunch outside because it was a beautiful day.

My next visit took me to a member who shares my actual birthday. I am grateful that we have Lutheran facilities that offer such life-giving opportunities to their residents. And then I worked my way back to McLean to visit one of our members who is battling cancer. It was a good day for her which made it a good day for me.

And when the day was almost over there was one more visit to make to offer the body and blood of Christ to a woman who cannot speak well since her stroke but she does her very best to repeat with me the words of the Lord's Prayer.

We are living in the shadow of the cross right now but we can also see the presence of the risen Christ. Here is an invitation to remember daily both the joys and the sorrows of the day and to write down our words of thanksgiving. It is a wonderful time of the year to let Christ know of our deep gratitude for all that he did and will do on our behalf and as we experience it in our interactions with others. Thanks be to God. Amen