

# *When Words Are Not Enough*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

2<sup>nd</sup> in a three-part series

March 25, 2012

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*John 11:47-53; 12:1-11 (NIV2011)*

<sup>47</sup> Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. <sup>48</sup> If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

<sup>49</sup> Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! <sup>50</sup> You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

<sup>51</sup> He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, <sup>52</sup> and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. <sup>53</sup> So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> Here a dinner was given in Jesus’ honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

<sup>4</sup> But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, <sup>5</sup> “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year’s wages.” <sup>6</sup> He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.

<sup>7</sup> “Leave her alone,” Jesus replied. “It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me.”

<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, <sup>11</sup> for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him.

[Six days later, after Jesus dies on the cross, his body must be tended to.]

*John 19:38-42 (NIV2011)*

<sup>38</sup> Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. <sup>39</sup> He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.

<sup>40</sup> Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. <sup>41</sup> At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. <sup>42</sup> Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

*There are times when words are just not enough. Today’s story is one of those times.*

Sadly, one of our staff members, Dan Smith, died recently. Dan’s memorial service was like so many, a vast outpouring of grief and love. It was love and genuine faith in Christ that characterized that gathering of family and friends. Funerals and memorial services are like that. They reach our deepest emotions. Confronting the reality of death strips away the pretense that marks us all. In the death of someone we know and love, we have to face the darkness ourselves. The question is not whether we will respond, but how.

So it is with the story that opens that twelfth chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus has restored life to Lazarus and proclaimed that he, Jesus, is the resurrection and the life. The result of Jesus’ restoration of life is not unexpected. Yet again, the authorities

redouble their resolve to get rid of Jesus. Seeing trouble boiling up, the high priest Caiaphas gets involved and issues a dark warning – better for one to die than the whole nation. The leaders of Israel then set out to ensure that this one person does die, rationalizing to themselves that the end justifies the means.

After some time passed, Jesus has come to Jerusalem in the early spring for the festival of Passover. He has returned to Bethany, the hometown of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. One can scarcely imagine the reception he receives. Indeed, the family hosts a dinner in Jesus' honor.

We know this family pretty well by this point, especially if we are familiar with the gospels of Mark and the others. Martha is busy in the kitchen making everything ready. Fires are burning, pots are flying around and Martha stands at the center of it all. Mary, to Martha's consternation, is spending most of her time with the guests as they recline around the table.<sup>1</sup>

Then, with Martha still swamped in the kitchen, Mary does the most remarkable thing. She comes to the men reclining around the table and bends down beside Jesus. And she lets down her hair.

In our world, a woman letting down her hair is a non-event. But in the world of first-century Judea, it was a big event, even shocking. A woman's hair was seen as sexually alluring.

But Mary did it. She was about to need her hair, all of it.

Mary then takes a jar filled with beautifully and intensely fragrant oil from a plant called "nard." It was very expensive and Mary has a lot of it in the jar.

She bends over, lifts Jesus' feet, pours some of the oil on them, and wipes them with her hair. The whole house fills instantly with the fragrance of the nard.

As the men sit there stunned, Judas, part of Jesus' inner circle, watches carefully and makes his opinion known. It is all well and good that Mary demonstrates her devotion to Jesus, but this oil is worth 300 denarii. "Expensive" is an understatement. It cost the equivalent of a year's wages for a typical laborer. A year! Would not such a sum be better used to feed the poor, to make life better for some of those with the least? Judas makes a powerful and compelling claim. Surely, we couldn't be surprised if the reader agrees. Judas has heard Jesus' sermons and is now putting them in practice, or so it might seem. Though John tells us Judas' motives in objecting are selfish, Judas' statement about using riches to care for the poor still tugs at us, especially, I suppose, those of us who have so much. N. T. Wright offers us these thoughts on Judas and Mary in this charged moment:

But there is no escaping the challenge posed by the stand-off between Mary and Judas. It is one of those scenes which positively shouts at the reader, 'Where are *you* in this picture?'

Are you with the shameless Mary, worshipping Jesus with everything she's got, risking the wrath of her sister who's doing all the hard work, the anger of the men who perhaps don't quite trust their own feelings when a woman lets her hair down in public, and the sneer of the person who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing?

Or are you with the cautious, prudent, reliable Judas (as he must have seemed to most of them), looking after the meager resources of a group without steady or settled income, anxious to provide for their needs and still have something left to give to the poor? (This last was a regular preoccupation. When Judas went out at the supper (13:29), the others

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<sup>1</sup> People didn't eat in chairs. At a hosted dinner, they would recline on thin mats around a low table with the feet pointed outward from the table. There were strict protocols to be followed at such dinners. Women were not allowed to join the men around the table.

guessed he might have been going to give something to the poor, even at that solemn moment.) Put aside your natural inclination to distance yourself from Judas. After all, even at that last moment none of the other disciples had suspected him of treachery. Can you see just a glimpse of him as you look in the mirror?<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, however, steps into the confrontation, speaking to Judas' point while ignoring his insincerity. This oil, Jesus says, had been set aside by Mary for Jesus' burial. The poor would always be around, but Jesus would not be around much longer.

Burial? There is no reason to think that Mary has had in mind anointing Jesus for his burial. Yes, the custom was to provide fragrant perfumes and spices to mask the smell of decay after death, but Mary is unlikely to grasp just how close Jesus is to his final confrontation with the authorities and the resulting death sentence.

Still, Jesus uses her gift to make just such a point. He takes this extraordinary act of devotion and reshapes it to prefigure his soon-to-be death and burial. Caiaphas doesn't realize the import of his statement that better one should die than many, but you and I can't miss its larger meaning. The same with Mary's gift.

For her, the gift of the nard is an expression of her utter devotion to and love of this man named Jesus. The jar may well represent her family's wealth, given its value. But even at 300 denarii, its value can't be measured in coin.

So it is with the gift of love that Nicodemus, the Pharisee, brings to Jesus when our Lord's burial is actually at hand. Like Mary, Nicodemus's gift is of an amount that would be used in a royal burial.

Words are a nice, but ultimately inadequate, expression of love. For Mary, for Nicodemus, and throughout the New Testament, love is not about what you say, or even what you feel. Love is what you do. Words are not enough.

### Burial practices in Jesus' day

A close reading of the various gospel accounts of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection can often be confusing to us because we don't know the basics of first-century Jewish burial practices. For example, did you ever wonder exactly what they were doing when they "buried" Jesus on Friday? Why are the women there on Sunday? Why is there a stone that can be rolled away?

Here's the big surprise: the Jews of Jesus' day practiced a two-stage burial. When a person died, family members would wrap the body in cloth and place it on a ledge in a cave or a man-made family tomb. Perhaps a year or so later, when the body had decomposed, the family would return to the tomb and place the loved one's bones in a box. The "bone box," called an ossuary, would then be labeled and stored in a crypt along with the bone boxes of other family members.

As for Jesus, he was crucified and died on Friday afternoon. Because Jews could not touch a dead body on the Sabbath, which began at sundown on Friday, Mary and the others had to move quickly. Jesus' body was taken down from the cross, quickly wrapped in some linen, and then carried to an unused tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. Like most such tombs, a round stone was used to block the entrance. The stone would keep animals out but still enable the family to come and go as they tended to the bodies and bones. There, Jesus' wrapped body was laid on a stone slab. The women planned to return at dawn on Sunday, after resting on the Sabbath, to finish preparing Jesus' body for the year or more it would lie in the tomb. Why women? Because dead bodies were seen as "unclean" by the Jews, handling them was left to the women, who were second-class citizens in the patriarchal cultures of the ancient world.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 11-21* (23). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Our Connection Groups have been watching segments of the film, *The Gospel of John*, each week. This week's segment of the film begins at 1:38:00 and ends at 1:43:14.

1. Caiaphas, the high priest, tells the gathered Pharisees, priests, and other leaders that it is better for one person to die than all of Israel. Simply put, Caiaphas claims that the end, saving Israel, justifies killing Jesus. You might spend some time discussing whether you too think that there are times the ends justifies the means. What would be an example of a time that might be so? What do you think Jesus would say about the end justifying the means? In some way, aren't ends and means an issue on Good Friday?

- Notice that even though Caiaphas is arguing for the death of Jesus for his own ends, his words carry a deeper meaning. As the high priest, his words are true – just not in the sense that he means them!

2. Mary's act is one of pure devotion and love. Share some stories of occasions in your experience when acts of love have had much more to say than words ever could.

3. What about Judas' argument that the nard should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Set aside Judas' motives and discuss the substance of what he said? Does it not have appeal to us? Doesn't it seem extravagant that Mary should pour a year's wages across Jesus' feet? Is there any way that this brief story ought to shape our own Christian practices?

### *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, Matthew 26:6-13</b> Compare this story with the one told by John? Same event? What are the key differences in the telling?	<b>Tuesday, Mark 14:3-9</b> Same assignment here.
<b>Wednesday, Luke 7:36-50</b> Similar story, but marked differences. How does this compare with the others?	<b>Thursday, John 12:20-36</b> After Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, he predicts his own death.
<b>Friday, John 13:1-17</b> On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples.	<b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b>

### **Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes**

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

#### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John**

We meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

#### **Monday Evening Class – now studying Paul and the Galatians**

We meet from 6:45 to 8:00 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

### **Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall**

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages. The class is usually led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

#### **On March 25: *A Guide to Understanding the Trinity***

#### **On April 1, Palm Sunday**

*From Palms to Politics:  
The Story of Jesus' Last Week*

#### **Coming in April**

*What the Bible Really Says About the End Times*