“A New Thing”
St. Mark’s Fincastle
Sunday, April 7, 2019
Rev. Dr. Jenny Call

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalm 126
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

Picture the scene of a celebratory dinner party, perhaps one that you have shared with friends or family. Imagine your loved ones gathered around the table, laughing over old stories and familiar jokes. The cook bustles around the kitchen and the smell of a pie in the oven is making your mouth water. Bread and wine wait on the table along with the fine china.

Now place yourself in the setting of today’s story from the Gospel of John. Jesus has returned to the home of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus following a brief time in the wilderness. This house is familiar to him, the closest thing this itinerant rabbi has to a home of his own. There have been many shared meals and stories around this table. Some things remain the same: Martha is busy in the kitchen, Mary is at Jesus’ feet, and Lazarus sits at the table with the disciples. But some things are drastically different. This time the siblings have invited Jesus for a celebration, a gesture of gratitude for the miracle he had performed in raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus’ bemused expression reveals the shock he still feels and he’s having a hard time with small talk. He was *dead*…buried in a tomb…and now he’s *alive*. He remembers being summoned by Jesus’ voice as if from a deep sleep and stumbling out still wrapped in burial cloths. It’s unbelievable, impossible even, but true. He is living proof of resurrection. Where there was once death, now there is life. There’s a saying in the African American church, “God makes a way out of no way.” Or as God says in Isaiah 43:19, *“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”*

Mary was able to perceive this new thing, of God making a way through death to resurrection. And though it broke her heart to understand Jesus was walking to his death, instead of allowing her heart to close up in fear and pain, she allowed her love for Jesus to break her heart wide open. Her love poured out in the perfume whose fragrance filled the entire house. There was no containing her love. It was generous, extravagant, and abundant, breaking down the social norms as she, a single woman, touched Christ’s feet, anointed them, and wiped them with her hair.

Her expensive gift was not saved, but was poured out, used (wasted, according to Judas). The smell of perfume permeated the house, sweet at first, and then overpowering, taking your breath away. It smelled of death, like the anointing for burial. Even amid the celebration, Jesus’ friends couldn’t avoid the signs. The memory of grief lingered and foreshadowed the sorrow to come.

Grief and loss are unavoidable parts of life, and our Lenten journey illustrates this as we are confronted by the darkness in Jesus’ journey to the cross and the darkness within us as we carry our own crosses. In this season, we live in this tension between life, death, and resurrection and reflect upon the intermingled sorrow and joy that make up our ordinary lives. As a chaplain, I’m confronted with this daily as students and staff share their sacred stories of heartbreak and hope with me (sometimes both within the same meeting).

Stephen Shoemaker said, “We live our lives in the shadow of the cross, but also live in the presence of the risen Christ.”

God says, *“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*

How do we hold on to this hope as we follow Jesus, even unto death? This story presents us with two options: leaning into scarcity and fear (as demonstrated in Judas) or Mary’s example of offering abundant love. Judas’ response chastising Mary seems at first to be benevolent in his concern for the poor. But he is exposed by the Gospel writer as a thief that is concerned only for what money he can take. Judas lives by the fear of scarcity, believing that there is never enough, even as he follows the very Son of God. Mary’s extravagance exposes the flaws in Judas’ character as she shows the way to new life.

Mary sat and learned at the feet of Jesus and witnessed resurrection as Jesus made a way for Lazarus even through death. Now, through her love and devotion, Mary prepared Jesus for the way ahead. Mary didn’t wait for Jesus’ burial, but honored the living Christ with her gift. She didn’t stop to count the cost, but gave of her love and devotion unreservedly, pouring out an abundance. Mary provided a model that Jesus would later use at the last supper, washing his disciples’ feet as an act of servanthood and love and teaching them to do the same.

At various times I have been like both Judas and Mary. I can be driven by fear and become stuck in hopelessness, certain that things will never get better and that my actions won’t make a difference. I can hold onto things that I’m afraid to use or share because I worry about what could happen if I run out. It is easy for me to become too concerned that there won’t be enough for me. But I have also found myself surprised by God’s extravagant love, which brings new life in all circumstances and inspires me to live from this sense of abundance.

I’m blessed to still have my 95-year-old grandmother living and in relatively good health. As a woman of deep faith, she is looking forward to her heavenly reward and has begun the process of saying goodbye and sharing her possessions with family. She gifted me her china years ago, which I have always loved as it represents the memories of family meals that she served with love. At the time she gave me the china, my kids were pretty young. We are not a fine china kind of household, particularly for these fragile dishes that can’t go in the microwave or dishwasher. Every time I would visit my Nana after receiving her gift, her face would light up and she would ask if I had used her dishes yet. She was disappointed each time I said no, but I promised her I would as they continued to collect dust in the cabinet. Then came my daughter Maryn’s 5th birthday, and she had the idea to host a tea party for her friends. We looked at my Nana’s dainty tea cups, much too fragile for clumsy little hands, and yet I remembered the extravagance of the gift, a gift that desired to be used. Of course the cups were made for a tea party. At the birthday party I was overwhelmed with love for the giggling group of preschoolers sipping pink lemonade out of Nana’s teacups, pinkies raised high. I was filled with gratitude for the gift of the dishes and the memories that will continue to be made as they are used around our family table. Gifts, like our love, are meant to be given, received, and shared.

Fear holds us back from living our full lives and sharing the love that God gives us. There is a lot to be fearful of these days as we take in the news and struggle with our own personal issues. I’m convinced from my work that everyone carries grief, regardless of whether they have lost someone to death. We have all faced disappointment, failure, and the death of dreams. We struggle with hopelessness and our powerlessness to change our circumstances. But this is where our faith comes in.

Valarie Kaur, an activist of the Sikh faith, said in November 2016, “The future is dark. But my faith dares me to ask: What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

What if resurrection is a rebirth and it takes something dying in order to bring new life? What needs to die in our lives in for us to embrace the full and abundant life God has promised us? What hope can we find for our world when we trust that God is bringing new life even through the pain of death and grief?

*“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”*

Can we hold onto hope and faith that death is not the end but that God is doing a new thing, bringing new life and resurrection into our seemingly hopeless situations? Can we allow our hearts to be broken open, by grief, yes, but also by overwhelming love?

As we journey with Jesus toward his death, may we know Christ and become like him in his death so that we might also be like him in his resurrection. May we have faith in the new thing God is doing in us and through us, making a way where there is no way. May we press on, loving fully, giving abundantly, and following faithfully. Amen.