SM060 Leave Her Alone!

It was the last stop before Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples had travelled many miles from Galilee in the north where his fame was greatest on their final journey to the city of the great king, Jerusalem. The disciples did not know it was his last journey. Only Jesus did, and a woman, who gained great insight into the things of God. Her name was Mary and she and her family loved Jesus dearly.

Jesus had been in their home before. On his first visit he was teaching the men who were gathered around him while the women busily prepared a meal for their special guest. Well, not all of the women were preparing. While Martha was busily engaged in the meal, she noticed that her sister was missing and discovered her sister sitting with the men, and not just sitting with the men, but she was up front right at Jesus' feet, listening with fascination at every word that came from his mouth, oblivious to all that needed to get done for the meal.

"Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work to get this meal ready," Martha had asked. Jesus replied, "Martha, Martha – you are worried and bothered about so many things when only a few things are necessary, really only one, and Mary has discovered what this one thing is as she sits at my feet."

It was a great lesson for both sisters and this first encounter with Jesus in their home, his compassion for them both, and the wisdom of his teaching showed them the one treasure to be valued above all other treasures –Jesus himself. They believed that he was the promised Messiah and their love and devotion to him was steadfast. They knew he had the words of God. They knew he had authority over all evil spirits that afflicted men. They knew that in him forgiveness could be found, and they knew that he had power to make the sick well.

When their brother Lazarus fell gravely ill, the sisters urgently and confidently sent their servants to Jesus that he might come and heal him. They knew he would come. Jesus loved them. They knew that Jesus loved their brother Lazarus. They knew that God would hear their prayer, and Jesus' prayer for healing, and everything would be alright.

But in their longest night and in their greatest test of faith, Lazarus grew weaker, Jesus did not come, and Lazarus died. The grief was overwhelming. Their beloved brother had unexpectedly died, and their beloved Master, Jesus, had failed them, so they thought. He had not come in time to heal Lazarus, and when Jesus did arrive, four days after his death, they wept at his feet, and Jesus wept with them.

But the death of Lazarus was an opportunity to teach the sisters a deeper lesson – Jesus had power to heal, and he had power to raise the dead, and Jesus not only had power to raise the dead but he said, "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, shall live forever with me."

Did the sisters believe this, he asked, and when they said yes Jesus took them to the tomb and raised their dead brother to life. "Lazarus, come forth," Jesus said, and their dead brother breathed again and

walked out of the tomb and lived. Astonishment and indescribable joy swept over the sisters. Their love for Jesus deepened and they were committed to him – the great treasure – above all else.

But not everyone was committed to Jesus. After Jesus raised Lazarus, some of the bystanders, who were not sympathetic to Jesus went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. The Pharisees went to the chief priests in the Temple in Jerusalem and told them and they all convened a council and said,

"What are we doing? This Jesus is a deceiver and is performing great signs. If we let him go on like this, he will continue to perform great signs and all the people will believe in him."

Another said, "Yes, and this will only stir up the Romans. They always are watchful for insurrection from us. When they see all the people following Jesus they will take it as a threat, and they will come and remove us from our place of leadership and they will destroy our nation."

Caiaphas, the high priest, listened for some time as the council discussed the problem of Jesus but didn't seem to know what to do about him. It was clear that he was performing many miracles, but they did not believe the miracles were from God. They believed Jesus was a deceiver, but what should they do about him? Finally, Caiaphas spoke, "Brothers, brothers, please quiet. It is clear from this discussion that none of you knows what to do. But I believe our course of action is clear. One man must die. Either this man dies, or the nation dies. Either we arrest Jesus and charge him or we will lose our nation to the Romans."

All fell quiet. It was a conclusion that many of them had thought about for some time – that Jesus must die – but they had been afraid to say it aloud. And now Caiaphas had uttered the words that the religious leaders had wanted to hear all along – they must do away with Jesus – and from that point on they planned to kill him and gave orders that if anyone found him, they must report his location so they could arrest him.

The Passover of the Jews was near. Pilgrims from across the land, and even from the far corners of the Roman empire journeyed to Jerusalem for the festival. As they journeyed and as they congregated in the Temple in preparation for the great feast that commemorated their deliverance from Egypt, they asked, "Do you think Jesus is coming to the feast? And if he comes, what will he do? And what will the leaders do for there is a rumor that they are sending out word for his arrest." And the people wondered what would take place in the days to come.

Jesus and his disciples were finishing the long walk from Jericho to Jerusalem, 17 long miles upward from the desert floor to the mountains of Judea. But rather than go straight to Jerusalem. Jesus stopped in one of his favorite places. It was the city where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. Jesus was in Bethany. But this time, he was enjoying a meal at the house of Simon the leper, one of the lepers that he had healed.

The disease of leprosy that afflicted many people in that part of the world was doubly difficult. It was difficult because of the obvious physical infirmity that it brought, and it was difficult because it cut off a person from the rest of the community. When Jesus healed the lepers, it was a double healing, for the

person's affliction was now gone, and the person could be restored to the community and enter into the social life of his friends, family, and worshippers of God. When Jesus went to the home of Simon the leper he was showing that Simon was physically healed and he was also restored to the family of God.

Many people were there. The disciples, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Martha was busily engaged in the kitchen preparing supper for this great host of people, and the crowds swarmed around the house and some came into the great banquet room and stood along the walls to watch the great feast. They wanted to see Jesus and they wanted to see Lazarus for all knew that Lazarus had died, was buried in the tombs for four days and that Jesus had raised him. But not everyone in this crowd was full of joy. Some were spies from the council of the religious leaders and they were sent to arrest Jesus and to kill Lazarus for because of Lazarus more and more people were believing in Jesus.

Finally the men came in to recline at the table. First came Simon the leper for he was the host. He welcomed the disciples, then Jesus, and there at Jesus' side was Lazarus, alive and full of health and vitality. Some of the people whispered, "It is true. There is Lazarus! He did raise Lazarus. Praise be to God! Jesus must be the Messiah."

Simon the leper turned to Jesus and said, "Master, giver of life, will you offer our prayer of thanks before we recline at table." All grew quiet, Jesus lifted his face and his hands to heaven and said, "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth." All said Amen, the servants began to wash the men's feet and anoint them before they reclined at table, the women prepared to serve, the crowd stood along the walls, but someone was missing. Where was Mary? She had not been in the kitchen helping her sister and this time Martha did not seem to be disturbed as she and her helpers joyfully prepared the meal for Jesus and her brother and Simon and the disciples. Martha half expected to see her bold sister, Mary, in the room with the men, listening to Jesus and preparing to eat with them! But when she looked around the room, Mary was nowhere to be seen.

Where was Mary? When we return, we will discover where she went and what she did.

Interlude

Mary was mingling among the crowd. She wanted to be close to Jesus but there was no approaching him. Simon and the disciples and her brother Lazarus seemed to have Jesus' full attention and Mary did not sense that it was right for her to be among them at this time. Besides, she was happy for her brother, Lazarus, to be close to Jesus and to learn more from him.

But as Mary mingled with the crowd, she heard disturbing whispers. "He is here, and Lazarus is here too." And when Mary looked in their direction they quickly stopped talking and turned away as if they did not want her to hear what they were saying. The men looked evil and Mary sensed that they were not there to learn but were there to cause harm. A few minutes later she heard more whispering, "he must die and the other one must die, too." And this time Mary grew alarmed but just when she was about to go to Jesus to tell him these words she heard the voice of Jesus rise up. It was a sad voice and he said, "I have been with you for these years and I have taught you many things about the kingdom of God. You have seen the power of the kingdom," and Jesus turned to Simon the leper and all knew that

Jesus was referring to his healing. “You have seen that the power of the kingdom of God is greater than all sickness, greater than all spirits, greater than all sin, and greater even than death.” And Jesus turned to Lazarus and shouts of praise went up for God’s great work in raising Lazarus from the dead.

“But I tell you this and you must understand, the kingdom of God is like a seed that God plants in the ground and there it remains until a day when new life comes and it rises above the ground, but before the seed can give life it must first be buried. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” And then the women began bringing the first dishes out for the men to eat.

Mary stood for a while transfixed by his words. She thought on his words that the kingdom was like a seed that must first be buried before it could rise with new life and she thought on the evil men in their presence who were there to do harm to Jesus and her brother if only they had their chance. And then it all came to her at once. “Yes,” she thought, “yes,” and she left the great feast at Simon’s house and hurried to her own home to retrieve something special.

She went into her room and located a treasure that she had owned for many years. It was a gift from her father when she became a young woman. She had often thought about using it. But the treasure was so valuable and so precious that she never felt it was the right time. It was an alabaster jar filled with perfume. The jar itself was valuable and was taxed heavily when it was imported from the exotic lands of the East. But the contents of the jar were even more precious for it was pure nard – the exotic anointing oil and perfume made from a plant of the Far East. One drop of nard would emit a lovely fragrance and the entire bottle was worth the wages of a man working for a full year. Mary picked up the nard and said, “Yes, this is what I have been saving it for,” and she walked back to the house of Simon the Leper, her heart filled with love and devotion.

When she entered, the servants were almost done washing the feet of all the men and anointing them with drops of oil upon their heads. They were just about to wash Jesus’ feet when Mary gently said, “No, please, stop.” Everyone looked in her direction. Why was this woman giving instruction to a man? Why was this woman in this gathering of men? She was not bringing in a dish of food for the men to eat. Why was she speaking and why did she not want the servants to wash the feet of Jesus?

Then Mary stepped forward and she went to the place where Jesus reclined. She opened her precious alabaster jar and poured some on his head. The men could not believe how much she poured and they gasped. Did she not know how expensive that was? Then she went to Jesus’ feet and they could not believe what they were witnessing. Mary poured the rest of the bottle of pure nard upon Jesus’ feet, rubbed the oil into his feet, loosened her hair, and began to dry his feet with her long, beautiful hair.

The men were shocked. This was not appropriate behavior for a woman, but Mary did not care for she was honoring her Lord and preparing him for the suffering that lay ahead.

Jesus watched as Mary, dearest Mary, the one who had sat at his feet learning, the one who wept at his feet grieving, was the one who was now kneeling at his feet, worshipping. Jesus’ heart filled with joy and love as he saw this daughter of Abraham preparing him for the suffering that was ahead. He was about to reach down and bless her when some of the disciples sprang up and said,

“I’m sorry, but this is enough. It’s one thing to anoint Jesus with some of it and that is proper and good but you could have sold the rest of this perfume for a high price and given the money to the poor.”

Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, stood up and said, “Brothers, you are right. If she had given the jar to me I would have sold it for the wages of an entire year. Think of how much money that would have been. Think of how many poor people we could have helped.” And as Judas said these words he moved toward Mary and grabbed her arm, and then Jesus said,

“No, you stop, all of you. You do not understand. Leave her alone. Go back to your place Judas. All of you men, go back to your couches and eat. She has done a good deed to me. You always have the poor with you. Anytime you wish you can go to the poor and give them something, but you will not always have me.”

Jesus looked around at his men who were ashamed and confused. Then Jesus said to them, “Did you not hear what I said about the kingdom being like a seed that is buried? She has heard and understood, and when she poured this perfume on My body she did it to prepare me for my burial.”

Jesus reached down toward Mary and she looked up from his feet. Tears were in her eyes as she heard Jesus speak of his death and burial. Though she did not fully understand, she more than anyone else knew that dark days lay ahead for him. Then Jesus said, “Truly I say to all of you, the gospel of the kingdom of God will be preached in the whole world to all the nations and when it is, what Mary has done for me will be told to all.”

Mary got up and with joy in her heart walked to her sister Martha who embraced her with love. Martha said, “You have done a great thing, sister! Shall we now serve them the rest of the food before it gets cold?” And with a smile on her face, Mary followed Martha into the kitchen where they picked up the heavy dishes full of good food and together they gladly served Jesus, his disciples, Simon the leper, and their brother Lazarus. The men ate in silence, but the perfume lingered long in the air and the words of Jesus about his burial stirred the hearts of all who wondered why he had said such a thing and what it all meant.

The next day, Jesus and his disciples awakened. Jesus looked upon his men. There was Peter, James, John, and Andrew, huddling and talking quietly. There was Philip who had followed him from his earliest days of ministry and Bartholomew, Matthew the tax collector, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, and Simon the zealot.

Then, with an ominous sound in his voice Jesus asked, “Where is Judas?” And one of the disciples said, “Lord, we do not know. As we were sleeping we could hear him groaning and muttering to himself. He was saying harsh words as if he were very angry. And then, he got up in the middle of the night.”

Just at that moment Judas walked back into the room and Peter said, “Judas, we were just talking about you. Where have you been?”

“None of your business,” Judas said and then he looked at Jesus and their eyes locked. “I, I, you just don’t need to know, Peter.” And then Judas looked away for he knew that Jesus knew where he had

gone during the night and that he had met with those who were plotting to kill him and that Judas had said, “I will betray him to you, soon, during one of these nights, when he is away from the crowds I will lead you to him. What will you give me for this?” When they counted out 30 pieces of silver he said, “This is not enough. This is the price to pay for a slave.”

“Exactly,” they said “for that is what we think of your Jesus. He is no better than a lowly slave and if you don’t cooperate with us, you will see what we will do to you.”

“Alright, alright,” said Judas, “just wait and I will lead you to him in secret.”

The conversation was playing in the mind of Judas and it seemed that Jesus could see it all and hear it all. Jesus looked upon Judas as if he were looking upon a venomous snake and then he said, “The time has now come. Today, we are going to Jerusalem.”