

## **Sunday, March 14, 2021 | Easter Upside Down**

John 12:1-8 | Mary of Bethany

Today, we kick off a brand-new series called "Easter Upside Down." In this four-week study, we'll be exploring four different scenes throughout the life of Jesus, illustrating how that Jesus flipped conventional understanding on its head. What the world considered as a right; Jesus considered as a wrong. What the world considered as necessary; Jesus considered as inconsequential. What the world considered as a blunder, Jesus considered as commendable.

Now, fair warning, the way these messages are laid out are somewhat different. Each week, as we study these four passages, we'll also watch a short video that'll illustrate those same passages. These videos have the testimonies of someone who actually witnessed what occurred in these scenes firsthand. Thus, between the preaching and reading of God's word, along with these video illustrations, the Bible will come alive to us in a new and exciting way.

The first person we'll be looking at in our series is a woman by the name of Mary. She was from a town called Bethany which was just outside of Jerusalem. Even amongst people like Peter, James, and John, Mary of Bethany was a remarkable individual in her own right. One of the first mentions of her comes in Luke 10. There we read about a particularly heated confrontation between two sisters. Martha, Mary's sister, invited Jesus and his disciples to dinner. And while Martha was busy making dinner preparations, Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, right beside the other men, and listened as Jesus taught.

Understandably, Martha was more than a little flummoxed and flustered, being left alone to make a meal for over a dozen people. So, her temper gets the better of her, and she says to Jesus, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her to help me." To which Jesus replies calmly, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." The point being, while serving Jesus is important, listening to Jesus is the far more important thing. If we're not careful, the activity of ministry can supersede our primary concern to actually listen to the One who is the heart and soul of ministry: Jesus Christ. We cannot do "church" and forget that Jesus is already in the room. Whether instinctively or intentionally, Mary knew it was far better to listen as Jesus spoke than make a meal. This is not to say that Martha was outright wrong. Everyone would need to eat eventually. But rather than berate her sister, Martha should've seated herself beside Mary and listened to what Jesus had to say. The meal could wait until the Master was done teaching.

But, as I'm sure you know, Mary of Bethany was not only the sister of Martha but also the sister of one of the few men to have ever died...*twice*: Lazarus (cf. Jn. 11:2). In John 11, Mary witnessed as Jesus raised her own brother from the dead after being dead for four whole days (cf. Jn. 11:17). This event is actually what expedited the Pharisees' and Sadducees' plan to kill Jesus.

The reason why the religious leaders kicked their plan into overdrive was that they feared that once the people heard that Jesus, among other things, could also raise the dead, the whole nation would flock to him. This might appear as an insurrection to the Romans, who would then pounce on Israel and destroy the country (cf. Jn. 11:45-53). So, as Caiaphas put it, it would be far better than "one man should die for the people," than "the whole nation should perish." Hence, in their minds, at least, the time for Jesus to die was at hand.

But sandwiched in between Lazarus' resurrection and the religious leader's plan to kill Jesus is a remarkable scene involving our lead character today: Mary of Bethan. You see, as a way to say, "Thanks Jesus for raising my brother from the dead," Mary and Martha held a dinner in Christ's honor.<sup>1</sup> And this is the passage we'll be breaking down today.

**READ: John 12:1-8 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at the table. <sup>3</sup> Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

<sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial." <sup>8</sup> For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

Now, before completely unpack this passage, let's hear about this moment from Mary herself.

**<PLAY – SkitGuys – Mary of Bethany Video>**

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<sup>1</sup> Keener, Craig S., *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2003), p. 862.

Needless to say, with her brother resurrected, Mary's life was, like The Fresh Prince of Bell-Air put it, "flipped turned upside down." Rather than his body breaking down in some cold and dark tomb, we see Lazarus alive and well, eating dinner with Jesus. Mary's brother was sitting right there in her own house. Without Jesus' intervention, Mary and Martha would've still been in mourning rather than at a calm and content family dinner. There would've been no laughter, no joy, only tears upon tears.

Needless to say, emotions would've been high in John 12. Martha and Mary's own grief was turned to joy the moment their brother step out from his own grave. Imagine the awe and wonder in the hearts of not just Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, but also the twelve disciples and the scores of other people who witnessed as Jesus raise someone from the dead. Thus, on this emotionally charged backdrop, we have Mary putting ointment on Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair.

Let's talk about this ointment.

The ointment is known as nard extracted from the root called 'spike.' Hence, many translations have 'spikenard' rather than just nard. It was only grown in the Himalayan mountains in a region between Tibet and India.<sup>2</sup> This ointment had to be brought in by camels over mountainous terrain, thus causing the price of the ointment to skyrocket. It was also contained in an alabaster jar, which in and of itself was also very valuable.

It would about a Roman-pound, which equates to 12 ounces today or about the same size and amount as a soda can.<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, as Judas points out, it cost around 300 denarii, which is the equivalent to about a year's wages at this time. How does that amount translate to today's standards? Well, according to the US Census Bureau, in 2018, the national median household income was a little over 63K.<sup>4</sup> With that kind of dough, one could go to college for a year at places like *Duke University*, *Columbia University*, and even our very own *Johns Hopkins University*.<sup>5</sup> Or for those less inclined toward academia, with a cool \$60K, one

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<sup>2</sup> Keener (2003), p. 863.

<sup>3</sup> Carson, D.A., *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, (Cambridge; Eerdmans, Publishing, 1991), p. 428.

<sup>4</sup> Rothbaum, Jonathan, and Ashely Edwards, "Survey Redesigns Make Comparisons to Years Before 2017 Difficult," September 10, 2019, *The United States Census Bureau*, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/09/us-median-household-income-not-significantly-different-from-2017.html>, [accessed, March 12, 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Jacobs, Peter, "There Are Now 50 Colleges That Charge More Than \$60,000 Per Year," July 10, 2014, *Business Insider*, <https://www.businessinsider.com/50-colleges-charge-60000-dollars-2014-7>, [accessed, March 12, 2021].

could purchase a Mercedes-Benz SUV, a two-bedroom condo in West Palm Beach, or if you were at a Sotheby's auction in Nov of 2019, you could've grabbed an original Star Wars prototype stormtrooper helmet.<sup>6</sup> So, the ointment was roughly the cost of what a man could earn in a year...a man...not a woman. We cannot know how much longer it would've taken a working woman to get the money together to purchase such an expensive item if a thing was even possible. But all that does is make Mary's generous gift all the more exemplary. Even if a man had done what Mary had done, Mary would still be worthy of more honor and praise. In all likelihood, the only reason Mary would've had it was either it was a family heirloom, or it was intended as a dowry for marriage.<sup>7</sup> Either way, Mary judged there was a better purpose for this ointment.

Now, why is this scene in all the Gospels, save Luke? (The anointing in Luke 7 takes place in Galilee, not Bethany.<sup>8</sup>) It highlights how that Jesus was a willing participant in his own crucifixion. While those close to him did not know exactly what was coming, Jesus did. The cross did not come about by accident but by divine design. Even someone like Mary, who acted of her own accord and out of love for Jesus, was an unwitting servant to Jesus' death. The ointment was a gift—a show of appreciation—for all that Jesus *had* done. What she did not know was that it was actually a gift—a show of preparation—for all that Jesus was *about* to do. The very next day, he would begin the week by entering through the gates carried on the back of a donkey with a crowd shouting, "hosanna," but will end the week carrying a cross on his own back while a crowd cried, "Crucify him!"

Using the accounts of this scene from Matthew and Mark along with John, we know that Mary not only washed Jesus' feet with the ointment but also poured it over his head and the rest of his body as well. That, in and of itself, would've been remarkable. But what was truly shocking was that Mary let down her own hair and wiped Jesus' feet with it. Not unlike today, even the idea of taking one's own hair to wash a person's feet would've been unthinkable then. Since the beginning of time, hair to a woman is their glory (cf. 1 Cor. 11:7). What's more, had Mary of Bethany been married, to uncover her head would've been a colossal embarrassment as the custom for married Jewish women during this time would've been to keep their heads covered

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<sup>6</sup> Smith, Andrews, "Star Wars Prototype Stormtrooper Helmet Estimated to Sell for Over \$60K at Auction," November 27, 2019, *The Imagine Games Network*, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/11/27/star-wars-prototype-stormtrooper-helmet-estimated-to-sell-for-over-60k-at-auction>, [accessed, March 12, 2021].

<sup>7</sup> Köstenberger, Andreas J., *John*, The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2004), p. 363.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, Leon, *The Gospel According to John, Revised*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1995), p. 508.

at all times.<sup>9</sup> In fact, in the Jewish tradition, like hair that was unbound, so the woman's morals were likewise "unbound."<sup>10</sup> But Mary did not care what the others thought. What's more, further adding to Mary's act was the fact that before Jesus ever washed the disciple's feet, Mary had washed Jesus' feet. When Jesus knelt in the upper room and washed their feet, the disciples were undoubtedly thinking of Mary as well.

Let's talk about Judas for a moment.

Matthew and Mark reveal that it wasn't just Judas who had this thought; the other disciples did too. But John calls out the only one to actually say something, whereas the other disciples knew better. What's ironic in Judas's comments was that he knew the ointment's market price but not its actual value.<sup>11</sup> He saw Mary's act of worship and thought of it as a waste because he never really understood who Jesus was. He could tell you the going rate, but not the best way to spend money. And while he claimed to want the ointment so he could sell and give it to the poor, Judas was really just greedy. He wanted his cut. He knew that, while he would, theoretically, have to give a portion of those proceeds away, his purse would still be the richer when it was all said and done. But this ointment wasn't being wasted at all, was it? This little scene highlights several things, but, at the very least, it highlights a critical difference between a fake follower and a faithful follower of Jesus: one, like Judas, will be incredibly selfish, whereas the other, like Mary, will be lavishly generous.

What's more, altruism is not enough when the worship of Jesus is disregarded. Feed a man without telling him about Jesus, and all you've done is fed him for a day. Feed a man while telling him about Jesus, and you will have fed for all eternity.

And while you might be surprised to learn that Judas wasn't just a betrayer but a thief as well, I'd remind you that one would eventually sell the Messiah for thirty pieces of silver would not hesitate to also steal a few coins from the ministry's purse. In fact, since the first century, there have been many men, like Judas, who have used the church as a means for material gain. I do not envy their end.

Interestingly, Mark's account of this scene explains that Jesus' sharp rebuke is what initially triggered Judas to betray Jesus as, after the dinner, he then goes straight to the

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<sup>9</sup> Keener (2003), p. 863.

<sup>10</sup> Morris (1995), p. 512.

<sup>11</sup> Morris (1995), p. 513.

chief priests with the plan. As one commentator put it, "Judas, seeing one source of personal enrichment lost, hastened to create another one."<sup>12</sup>

So, what's the takeaway?

True worship has nothing to do with what others think of us and everything to do with what Jesus thinks of us.

Not unlike when David danced before the Lord in 2 Sam 6, Mary garnered the contempt of those around her. And like David, Mary cared little about what people thought about her and care much about what Jesus thought of her. She would willingly be ridiculed for her devotion if it meant that Jesus was given worship due to his station.

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<sup>12</sup> Morris (1995), p. 514.

## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

### **Easter Upside Down | Week 1 | Mary of Bethany**

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The first person we'll be looking at in our series is a woman by the name of Mary. She was from a town called Bethany which was just outside of Jerusalem. Even amongst people like Peter, James, and John, Mary of Bethany was a remarkable individual in her own right. Through her example we'll learn that **true worship has nothing to do with what others think of us and everything to do with what Jesus thinks of us.**

Pastor's manuscript can be found here: