

John 12:1-8
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Fruits of Pilgrimage

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1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

Early in the fourth gospel, John the Baptist's disciples asked Jesus where he lived. "Come and see," Jesus replied.

A week ago a group of us returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Each of us had our own reasons for going. I wanted to **see** and to **be** where Jesus had been--knowing that a sense of Place, informed by sight, smell, hearing, would help bring to life stories of Jesus and the disciples--as indeed it did

Of course, nothing in the Holy Land remains exactly as it was in Jesus' time. The landscape is relatively unchanged: the vast, desolate beauty of the Judean wilderness; the rocky limestone hills around Jerusalem covered with olive trees, cypress and pine; the relatively gentle and fertile terrain of the Galilee; and her lake--so big it's rightly called a "Sea". Only there, in the land itself, and in the excavated streets and houses of Capernaum could I begin to imagine where and how--and how far!-- Jesus "walked".

It's much, much harder at the holy sites. Most are in urban areas where there are crowds of other pilgrims and the bustle of modern life. Since many are in the occupied West Bank, daily you see the tragic injustice inflicted on the Palestinians. At the sites themselves, churches and monasteries have been built and rebuilt OVER tradition-honored locations of events: Annunciation; Visitation; Nativity; Baptism; Beatitudes; Transfiguration; Last Supper; Garden of Gethsemane; Crucifixion; Burial/Resurrection; Ascension. Amazingly, we visited them all.

At the end, our leader and teacher Andrew Mayes invited us to share anything that had "shifted" for us in the 10-day pilgrimage. Lots had for me, of course. But the deepest shift was spiritual. It's about my attitude toward the practice of faith. I'd like to share the story.

It was forty years in the making. In my twenties, I visited Israel with friends. When we went "up to Jerusalem" to shop in the the Old City market, we ambled into the Church of the Resurrection (aka Holy Sepulcher). The cavernous complex has been repeatedly rebuilt. It covers a big area and encompasses both a quarry where Jesus is thought to have been crucified and the tomb where tradition said he was buried and raised. Many chapels there honor different climactic moments in the Passion.

I blush to recall how repulsed I was. Mind you, I was not simply an indifferent skeptic; I was an angry atheist. Reared as a low-church Protestant, I was shocked by the unfamiliar sights and smells, the confusion of altars, candles, hanging lamps, and other accumulated trappings of Catholic and Orthodox worship in the old church and shrine. The fact that the Catholics, Greek

Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox claim different parts of it as their territory just fueled my righteous disgust. Couldn't Christian denominations even come together **there**, of all places?!

When I returned to the Church of the Resurrection in 2011 that old hostility was gone. I was a Christian, of course. But even before that return to faith, my years in Rome had softened my Protestant prejudices. In Rome, the real art masterpieces are in churches. Studying them, popping in and out to see them, I came to be at home with the stylistic jumble and accretions in old Catholic churches. I love the hint of incense. I light candles gratefully--as I did for many of you this time.

One thing at the Church of the Resurrection stopped me in 2011. The purported "Stone of Anointing" roused my old defenses. It's the first thing you see on entering. A rectangular stone, larger than a human body, it lies on the floor, surrounded by a frame. It commemorates the account in John of Nicodemus' anointing Jesus' body for burial. Fragrant oil thinly coats the stone. People prostrate themselves there, rubbing cloths and other items across the surface to carry back home. Some of them linger, weeping. Cynically I noted that the stone had been installed only a two hundred years ago. But in truth I was deeply challenged by those public displays. My critical attitude was a defense. God forgive me: I judged the faithful as superstitious and overly-dramatic. And I turned away.

February 2016, we began our pilgrimage with a visit to the Church of the Resurrection--my third in forty years. "Christian pilgrims always go there first," said our leader Andrew.

Then came the remark that sparked my spiritual shift. "You don't have to LIKE the Church of the Resurrection," he added. "It's a place of encounter." When I mentioned my reservations about the Stone of Anointing, he asked, "Have you never wept over someone's death?"

Fear is a terrible thing. For fear of the other, we build walls: separating the US from Mexico, e.g., or enclosing Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank. For fear of our own emotions, of losing (the illusion of) control, we may build walls within ourselves, within our spirits. We don't know we have them until the walls come down.

My spiritual journey seems to be about taking down walls. As I said here recently, in my conversion God's love dissolved the wall I had unwittingly built between me and faith. In Jerusalem this time, another wall of fear and prejudice came down. Andrew's words opened my heart to accept--even to honor--the outpouring of deep, authentic, loving faith expressed at the Stone of Anointing.

And I recognized its kinship with today's gospel.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

All four gospels have a version of this shockingly intimate story. Only John places it in Lazarus' house. Only in John is the woman known and named: Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha, disciple of Jesus, sister of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead just before.

Right there in the middle of dinner, Mary does this inexplicable, over-the-top, lavish thing. It is extravagantly generous--less in the price of the nard than in Mary's unbridled, unselfconscious, emotional and physical outpouring.

What was it about? Why did she do it? Was it gratitude for Jesus' reviving of her brother? Was it prescient grief for Jesus' impending death? Mary is silent. She gives no hint of her motives. Nor does the author.

We are left with the simple, stunning fact of Mary's tender, heart-felt action. We are left to imagine the perfume that filled the house, along with the range of intense, conflicting emotions.

The story is told in few words; it's spare and matter of fact. We can engage it on its own terms. Or we can turn away. We can turn the page.

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair.

Three weeks ago in Jerusalem, this sentence from the gospel sprang off the page and came to life before me. Present-day pilgrims caressing the Stone of Anointing illuminated an amazing, arresting, ancient story--and made it real.

More than that. The encounter became an invitation to deepen my own faith, to open myself to new--and timeless--expressions of devotion, expressions of **my** love for the God who has loved me so long, so patiently, so well.

I returned to the Church of the Resurrection alone several times during our stay, to light candles, to kneel and pray at the tomb, and--yes--at the Stone of Anointing. Leaving after a final visit on the last day, probably for the last time in my life, I thought, "I love this place."

Thanks be to God.