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

I am going to let you in on a weird fact about myself. I have a thing for ampersands. Do you know what an ampersand is? It's the loopy "and" symbol above the number 7 on your keyboard. The ampersand comes from the Latin word meaning "and", which, when written in cursive letters e and t, together form the ampersand symbol. The symbol itself has been found as far back as the first century in graffiti from Pompei. Here's a fun piece of trivia: We call it an ampersand because when children were learning the alphabet in the early 19th century, it was considered the 27th letter, so they would say x, y, z and and. To make it less confusing they started saying "and per se", which together sounds like ampersand. But the symbol itself just indicates an addition of something, something more to come. It's just a simple symbol, but its meaning, to me, is profound. It's so significant, in fact, that I had it tattooed on my arm at a particularly hopeless time, to remind myself that there is always more to come.

As humans, we tend to be very resistant to the idea of loss... Giving things up, having things taken from us, death, or change. It is the fear of these things that fuels social media and mainstream news outlets. The fear of loss has the unfortunate effect of making us hold on tighter, clamp down on what is familiar, what we think we need or deserve, and fight to hold onto it, regardless of the consequences. It makes sense that we avoid loss; grief is not fun. But unlike us, God is not afraid of change. Rather than seeing loss, death, or change as an ending, God sees it as an entry point.

Our God is the God of resurrection, the God of the impossible, the God of the ampersand. Isaiah prophetically encourages the Hebrew people to not dwell on the past; instead to look to the future, to trust God is about to do a new thing. Today's reference from Isaiah is recalling their passage out of slavery in Egypt through the parted waters of the Red Sea. He

says God will make a way in the wilderness, meaning that God makes impossible things possible. God knows we cannot see the future, but if we trust God enough to believe there is indeed more of the story yet to come, we will see God do unimaginable things. Today's Psalm speaks of the sorrowful, who despite their pain, still carry and sow the seed of a future yet unknown. It is a joyful song of the blessing of reaping a harvest of joy after first seeding the soil with tears. All those who work in the soil know that there is no harvest available for those who do not first plant the seeds. Faith is the discipline of choosing to trust God's promises for us, even when it hurts. The hope of resurrection is one we look forward to. As long as our memories of the past fuel our faith for the future, they offer us value. However, we must be careful because holding onto what has happened in the past can become an impediment when it makes us resistant to the unfolding work of God ahead.

In today's gospel lesson we see Jesus and Mary both looking ahead and grappling with Jesus' coming death. This is a bizarre story and if you aren't scandalized by it, for multiple reasons, then you may have been dozing during the reading. Also, this story tends to get muddled with other stories, so first let's get the scene correct. Each of the four gospels talks about someone anointing Jesus. Unlike the other accounts, this story is not about a sinful or obscure woman. This is Mary of Bethany, sister to Martha and Lazarus. And this story happens in their home not long after Lazarus had himself been raised by Jesus from the dead.

Let me say that again. Lazarus had been raised from the dead. We don't know what this family discussed around the dinner table after Lazarus' experience, but we can be certain that they all gained an appreciation for both the gift of life and the hope we have in Christ to make impossible things possible.

The incredible impact of Lazarus' story certainly played a role in Mary's dramatic act in this story. I realize there is another story of a woman anointing Jesus' feet, but don't think

this was some common practice from the first century. This was outrageous! Jewish women never uncover their hair in public! That was something only gentiles and prostitutes did, marking this scene with an intimacy and vulnerability that even makes us, two thousand years later, squirm to look at too closely. Additionally, this was a world where a women's lives had very little value, so seeing Mary perform the role of a slave in anointing Jesus' feet isn't too strange. Rather, the one glory a female possessed, apart from childbearing, was in the beauty of her long hair. The shocking thing about this story was that Mary used her greatest personal asset, to wipe the grubbiest part of Jesus, his feet.... Paul tells us that for him, whatever things he once counted as assets, he now regards as loss in view of the greatness of knowing Christ. Mary demonstrates for us what that sentiment looks like in a practical way.

Mary's love and devotion for Jesus are on full display in this story. She had purchased a jar of perfumed ointment that would have cost a year's wages. According to Jesus, she did this because she knew he would die, something he had been warning his followers about, yet they still failed to believe or accept it. Jesus did not try to stop her, and he scolded Judas for missing the point.

Jesus knows that our behavior will always be shaped by what is in our hearts. Judas' heart was filled with greed, so his appearance of propriety was masking the way his heart clung to wealth. He had no faith; he grasped what he could see and control for his own benefit. Jesus was not telling Judas to ignore the poor. Jesus words indicated his desire for Judas to provide for the poor forever. But prioritize love for Jesus first, which inspires the generosity that will carry it forward after Jesus was no longer with them.

In this story, Mary's heart was filled with love for Jesus. She had watched her beloved brother die, watched Jesus raise him from the dead, and then heard Lazarus' own story of the experience. She was filled with grief at what was coming, but she didn't let that make her cling to Jesus' life. Lazarus' story heralded resurrection to her in a way that gave her

the capacity to believe there was more coming, more to the story than she could yet see, but her faith allowed her to do what Paul tells us to do; to forget what lies behind and press forward into what lay ahead. Mary embraced the ampersand, do we?

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul admonishes us to press towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God. This is not speaking to a pursuit of an afterlife. Paul is talking about the call of God to live this life according to the priorities of heaven. But we can't do that when our hearts are filled with the priorities we make for preserving this life or preserving it according to the ways that feel comfortable and stable for us above others. When Mary laid aside her pride to demonstrate love for Jesus, she showed us an example of becoming like Jesus in his death. Allowing ourselves to trust God enough to do things that make us look foolish, to elevate others more than ourselves. To embrace change, discomfort, and loss, trusting there is more to come, is how we live our faith. Trusting the ampersand emboldens us to pour out our riches on the feet of Jesus, to plant our tears, like seeds in the ground at Jesus' feet, and trust that God will resurrect all we think is loss and transform it into gain.

May we be a people willing to trust God, humbly laying aside the things we pride as gains in this life, accepting the changes and losses, knowing that God is always making entry points of our dead-ends. May our hearts remain soft and willing to follow, even when it hurts. And may we always have the grace to find, instead of a ending, an ampersand.