

When someone raises your brother from the dead, what do you do?

Do you send a thank you note, maybe a fruit basket or an assortment of flowers?
Post it on Facebook with before and after photos and a recommendation review?

Shake his hand and slip him a little extra cash for a job well done?

There isn't a well established etiquette for something as extraordinary and unprecedented and profound as what Jesus did for Lazarus and his family; there is no way to express adequate thanks.

It's the same problem Christians have always had with God, who is so extravagantly gracious, so generous with the miracle of life that we have no way to respond in kind, why saints and poets of every age lament the smallness and inadequacy of their faith and their offerings.

Lazarus and Martha and Mary do what they can, and like any committee faced with a dauntingly important celebration, they plan a dinner.

They don't have the financial means to rent a banquet hall or have it catered, so they host it at their house for Jesus and his friends.

It is really an extension of last week's story from Luke's gospel, an extravagant and absolutely necessary celebration of a man who was dead but now is alive, was hopelessly lost yet now is found.

Instead of focusing on two brothers, however, this week's party has two sisters in view. *Martha served*, because that's who Martha is and what she does.

She is steady, consistent, predictable, and when Jesus blows open her world and her mind and her brother's tomb and changes everything, she puts on an apron and doesn't change at all.

Thank God for Martha, because the dinner and the story and the celebration named church would never happen without her.

John hardly mentions her, however, which is probably fine with Martha, who likes to hide in the kitchen anyway, who has little patience for theology and big conversation that doesn't get anything accomplished.

John focuses instead on Mary, who does something as unusual as Jesus did, who demonstrates a depth of gratitude that Martha shares but doesn't so obviously show.

Mary lavishes love upon Jesus in an awkwardly stunning display of gratitude.

She anoints him like a king with perfume priced like a wedding ring, a once-in-a-lifetime expense for a once-in-a-lifetime love.

She kneels before his feet in the position of worship and servitude, and wipes his feet like a slave who must do anything and everything he tells her, because her brother is alive again and that is how she feels.

Craig Koester notes that *it was also significant that Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair, since well-kept hair contributed to a person's dignity in the ancient world.*

Women took pride in long hair, which was considered attractive, and damage to one's hair was considered degrading.

By using her hair to wipe the feet of Jesus, Mary heightened the sense of self-effacement

already reflected in her willingness to serve him as a slave. (Koester, Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel, as quoted in Brian Stoffregen's Exegetical Notes at Crossmarks.com)

Mary owes everything to Jesus, is grateful beyond words, and she tells him so, kneeling at his feet, praying with her body and her bank account.

It is an act of gratitude so total and strange and beautiful and disturbing and deep that it smells like resurrection, a fragrance so powerful and pungent that it erases the stench of death, which of course is Mary's way of saying to Jesus "I understand what you have done."

It is a profound, unprecedented and personal moment between two people in a full room, like the man on the brown line yesterday singing out loud to Jesus with no concern about who hears him or what they might think.

Surely everyone figures they've lost it, which is a typical reaction to those who have found it.

Judas speaks up for the rest of the train car, practical Chicago businessman that he is, chair of the finance committee quietly on the take with a sudden political interest in positioning himself with the sacred work with the poor organized by Martha's social justice committee.

It's probably an election year for treasurer, and in the perfumed air Judas smells a campaign opportunity.

He has too much power and prestige to be grateful, too many practical interests and budget priorities to stomach the wastefulness of grace.

For all his shady motives, Judas is the voice of reason that speaks a certain word of truth, even if it is only lip service.

And it is good news for all of us that he is there at the dinner too, because if traitors and hypocrites and politicians and Machiavellian manipulators weren't invited to the resurrection party, the church would quickly run out of people and money.

His very presence at the party, the very presence of the smarmy and self-interested in the community of faith, is in itself a witness to the impractical extravagance of grace, the wastefulness of God that covers even the stench of corruption with the aroma of complete and costly love.

The same love that pleads for the fruitless fig tree and welcomes home the wasteful son and raises the hopelessly dead to life also embraces those who question, criticize, belittle and betray it.

That unsearchable divine love is what Mary acknowledges on her knees, soaks into her tresses, wipes across Jesus' feet, and releases into the air as an overpowering scent of joy and gratitude.

And Jesus notices.

Jesus not only notices, he appreciates, and he defends Mary's actions that smell and sparkle like his own.

But Jesus does something even more.

He learns.

Mary's humble act of love humbles him, and he, the rabbi, becomes her student, the male disciple of a female teacher at his feet in a rigidly patriarchal world.

The next chapter begins with Jesus following Mary, on his own knees washing and wiping his disciples' feet to teach them as Mary taught him.

Jesus, powerful enough to raise Lazarus from the dead, is humble enough to follow and learn from a woman on her knees at his feet, honoring her by being like her.

But it is not only Mary that Jesus follows.

Jesus follows and honors Martha too, serving his disciples dinner, though John skips that part of the story too.

Jesus also follows their brother Lazarus.

Jesus also dies and comes back from the dead.

And that is the strange and beautiful and disturbing and deep surprise of Lent.

We enter into this season with noble intentions of following Jesus and realize that Jesus is following us.

He follows us as Francis Thompson's *Hound of Heaven*, chasing after us with a pungent love that will not be denied.

He follows us down the corridors of history, down the back alleys of our lives, all the way down to his knees, serving dinner, washing feet, and dying our death on our cross.

He follows us all the way to hell, searching without rest until he finds us.

And what does he do when he finds us?

Leave us a note, a fruit basket, a floral arrangement, a nice perfume perhaps?

There isn't a well established etiquette for something as extraordinary and unprecedented and profound as this divine love.

So Jesus does the best he can: he follows the lead of his friends and he throws a dinner.

Robert Buchanan describes the scene:

*'Twas the Bridegroom sat at the table-head,
And the lights burnt bright and clear --
'Oh, who is that," the Bridegroom said,
"Whose weary feet I hear?" ...*

*The Bridegroom stood in the open door,
And he was clad in white,
And far within the Lord's Supper
Was spread so broad and bright. ...*

*'Twas the Bridegroom stood at the open door,
And beckon'd, smiling sweet;
'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Stole in, and fell at his feet,*

*"The Holy Supper is spread within,
And the many candles shine,
And I have waited long for thee
Before I poured the wine!"*

*The supper wine is poured at last,
The lights burn bright and fair,
Iscariot washes the Bridegroom's feet,
And dries them with his hair.*