



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

March 21, 2021

The Journey V: A View from the Bottom

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A View from the Bottom**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: April 1, 2021

The Journey V: A View from the Bottom

Last week's lesson told the story of Jesus' very first public ministry from the Gospel of John.

When he sees the merchants outside the Jerusalem temple, those who expect to trade a coin for an animal as an admission price to God's intimacy, his anger spills over.

He upsets the money changers and those who control the community.

From that first act, the shadow of the cross falls upon him.

Later that night, Jesus confides his earthly ministry will embody the promise, "for God so loved the world," he was given so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

Each sign he performs, feeding from scarcity, commanding nature to calm, and healing; all flow from divine love for human life.

Over the course of his ministry, Jesus amasses crowds of followers.

In equal measure to the belief Jesus inspires, his ministry threatens to dismantle the religious authorities' grip on the people.

John's gospel presents the final wonder of Jesus' public ministry when Mary and Martha plead for him to heal their brother, Lazarus.

By the time Jesus arrives, Lazarus has been dead, entombed for days.

On the one hand Jesus shares their grief and weeps. And on the other, he knows the authorities will seize him when he goes beyond the final limit of human imagination.

He proclaims for all to hear, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”

Then Jesus calls the dead Lazarus from the tomb and effectively steps into his own.

We are approaching the climax in this gospel story, the tension rings at a fevered pitch.

Please pray with me,
Holy God, you walked this earth in human form to show us the way home to you. Silence in us now any voice but your voice that the truth startles us to confidently follow in your son’s footsteps. Amen.

John 12:1-11

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.

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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. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

¹⁰ So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

One of the volunteer hosts, a man known only as “Peter” says, “I never really understood why people come here from all over the world to see the shoes...

For one thing, it's one of the few exhibits you can smell," he says of the faint, rubber-tinged fumes that become nauseating the longer you stand in the room.

"But then, one day, I looked down and saw those baby shoes, and it made sense," he says, pointing to the tiny artifacts.

"That's when I thought, 'A mother was carrying that child on the train.'"

Peter describes the entrance to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C and the 4,000 stacked men's loafers, children's booties, and women's two-inch heels heaped together.

During WWII, shoes had become such a scarce commodity, the Nazis forced prisoners to surrender them as they entered concentration camps.¹

Shoes. Throughout this season of Lent, we examine ordinary objects in our lives to be startled again by the sacred.

This week, we consider shoes and the lives they held. So many stories come to mind of shoes. When placed alongside Jesus' life, I recalled the haunting image of those shoes as I entered the Museum several years ago while holding an identity card of a woman who had perished in the slaughter.

¹ Katherine Boyle, "At the Holocaust Museum, treading quietly through the unspeakable," *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2012
https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/at-the-holocaust-museum-treading-quietly-through-the-unspeakable/2012/08/23/734524bc-eb15-11e1-9ddc-340d5efb1e9c_story.html

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Shoes.

On the Pest side of the river, stand 800 pairs of shoes, sculpted from iron, now rusted from the weather.

Some have worn-down heels, others have shabby uppers; some have laces, others have straps left open;

some are classic women's pumps, others are workmen's boots; some are standing straight up, while others have fallen over, as though they were hastily taken off.

As you walk along the Danube, these shoes evoke the entirety of those who wore them.

There too stand tiny shoes of children, not of bronze, but cast from iron as well.

These sculpted shoes point to the twenty thousand lives lost in the winter of 1944.

Marched from their homes, the anti-semitic Arrow Cross party of Budapest told their victims to stand along the shore and remove their shoes before they were shot.

Their bodies fell into and were carried away in the watery grave and their executioners retrieved and traded the surviving shoes.²

Shoes stand in other places.

² Sheryl Silver Ochayon, "Shoes on the Danube," *Yad Vashem*, <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/shoes-on-the-danube-promenade.html>

In 2017, 14,000 shoes stood near the US Capital to remind us of the children who had been shot and killed in the years since Sandy Hook.

Each year Ft. Hood and other military bases around the country commemorate the number of soldiers killed since 9/11 by placing a pair of boots on the lawn. Thousands of military style boots stand with small US flags.

You've heard the phrases:

“You never know another's life until you've walked a mile in their shoes.”

“He died with his boots on.”

“Those are big shoes to fill.”

“If the shoe fits, wear it.”

You get the gist.

Shoes exemplify the essence of someone's life.

We can get so caught up by outward appearances, above the ankles that we don't see one another clearly until we examine his or her walk in life.

A view of and from the bottom reveals the truth.

Those at the bottom, however you want to describe social or economic standing, have so much to lose or gain when an event rattles the status quo that they cannot deceive themselves into a false reality.

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Those at the bottom know what is true, and right, and enduring. They know the missteps and the bold steps.

Your housekeeper is more likely to discern if you stick to a new diet from what is in your trash than your nutritionist.

The nerdy kids at school are apt to see through the preening of the cool kids who work hard to capture attention.

From my consulting experience, the entry-level analyst probably knew more about the work quality from other team members, their understanding of the logic behind multiple drafts, data analysis, and of the overall progress than the senior members presenting to the partners or clients.

Always, our most successful projects started at the bottom of an organization or front-line where “the rubber meets the road” so to say.

We can learn from those who are at the bottom of the since their lives depend upon seeing the realities of life.

Mary sees the truth of Jesus. She sees his grace.

Whenever we encounter Mary, the sister of Martha of Bethany, she is always at the feet of Jesus. Such a perspective allows her to see what he is doing, hear what he is teaching, and receive what he offers.

She believes.

A woman in first century Palestine was at the bottom of the ladder in every possible respect.

Mary does not care. She knows Jesus has brought life in every interaction...and he raised her brother from the dead.

She has nothing to lose in pouring out her devotion to him. We have everything to gain in witnessing what she does.

Mary holds a clay jar in her hands, worth a year's wages.

Wordlessly, she kneels at Jesus' feet, breaks it open, and fragrance fills the house – a sharp scent halfway between mint and ginseng. In such contrast to the stench that arose from her brother's tomb.

She pours perfume on Jesus' feet, loosens her hair and wipes the perfume from these feet in a gesture of pure love.

She offers to Jesus what he will in turn offer to each of his disciples in the Passover meal when he will strip to the waist, kneel, wash his disciples' feet, and command them to do so for others.

She knows that he has laid down his life for her brother and for her.

Tired, dusty feet. Gnarled from walking through Galilee and Jerusalem. Feet that carried the good news for all to hear and will in days be mutilated with a stake driven through to fix them to a cross.

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Foot washing and dusty shoes challenges our sense of propriety. We'd rather not have some of our peers caress our feet and examine our ratty shoes.

Imagine if only John's gospel recorded the night of the Last Supper, we'd not celebrate communion each month.

Basins would be installed in pews to make it easier for each of us to wash the feet of the person next to us?

Anyone else squirming besides me?

That's too intimate. And that is precisely the point.

Late in the season of Lent, we are to ask ourselves if we have adjusted our point-of-view since Ash Wednesday, to know we are dust made into flesh that will again become dust.

Are we willing to get down on the ground and examine our lives? We might see a truth we've missed of ourselves, of others?

Whatever gets in the way of seeing the truth of Jesus in our lives also gets in the way of receiving his gift of grace.

Don't you wonder what might it feel like to be Mary, and ensure Jesus knows how deeply you love him?

Do you ever have the experience of showing another how you love them by the way you care?

This story has been widely re-told, but as I searched for the original text for correct attribution, I couldn't find it.

Perhaps this is indicative of Father Michael Renninger. He is pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Richmond, VA and this is his story.

In college, on his way home one weekend, Renninger stopped to visit his grandparents.

His grandfather had a series of strokes that left him paralyzed on one side and unable to talk or swallow easily.

His grandmother determined to take care of him at home, even though a feeding tube would have been easier.

On that day, Renninger recalled, he opened the squeaky front door and immediately knew things were not right.

The goopy liquid food was splattered all over his grandfather, whose face was red. His grandmother was struggling to care for him when she realized their grandson had entered the house.

Assuming he didn't need to walk into this embarrassing situation, Renninger started to leave.

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Then he heard his grandmother's stern voice: "Don't you dare. Don't you dare leave. Sometimes this is what love looks like."³

Love doesn't lie; love tells the truth.

Love doesn't hide; love steps out of the shadows.

Love will lay down its life for another.

Love embraces and holds tightly for all eternity.

We do not memorialize Jesus' sandals with bronze,
we become his feet to carry his message.

For God so loves the world.

³ Mark Wingfield, A Sermon Illustration I wil Never Forget, Baptist News Global, August 23,2020, <https://baptistnews.com/article/why-we-must-not-look-away-in-the-current-crisis/#.YFS-c-YpB0s>



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