

Gospel sound track: Sunday, April 1

*John 12:1-8*

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [March 14, 2001](#) issue

One Saturday afternoon, my wife and I escaped to the movies. We had barely slipped into our seats and positioned the bucket of popcorn between us when a gaggle of teenagers jostled into the row behind us. They were having a great time together, noisily talking and teasing and laughing. During the previews, the conversation became even more animated as each kid weighed in on the merits of a coming attraction. Every so often I would turn around to dart a glance in their direction, a look I hoped would come across as a serious but not-too-parental appeal for theater courtesy. I was relieved when the opening credits of the feature finally started to roll and the group quieted down.

But not for long. One of the teenagers had evidently already seen the movie, and was eager to serve as plot guide for the others. "Omigosh," she croaked in a stage whisper, as the male protagonist made his first appearance, "he is going to like fall for her so-o-o hard." Now my wife and I had guessed that there might be a romantic spark between the male and female leads, this being the movies and all, but it would have been nice to watch it unfold ourselves. "Look, look," our cinematic herald shrieked a few moments later, "he forgot to put the key back under the mat. Did'ja see that? That's how the cops are gonna' catch him!" With one huge "whoosh," all dramatic suspense rushed out of the room.

Look carefully at this story in the Gospel of John. Mary is anointing Jesus, and at first the narrator seems like the teenager in the theater who was providing play-by-play commentary. Notice the whispered asides. "Look," John confides, turning around with his box of popcorn, "there's Lazarus! He was raised from the dead in the prequel." Or he hisses, "Hey, keep your eye on that guy Judas! He's about to betray Jesus!" And, "Don't believe a word of that caring-for-the-poor stuff. Judas is really a thief!"

What is going on here? Can't John just allow the story to unfold on its own? Do we really need this voice behind us constantly spilling the beans on the plot?

In the case of John, this tendency to give whispered asides is not a narrational quirk, but rather a profound mark of John's theology. John is convinced that life is double-plotted, that ordinary events unfold around us but that hidden among all the mundane props are signs of the eternal. The wine is in the water, the light in the darkness, the Word in the flesh. For John, belief is the capacity to see not only life's surfaces but also its holy depths, to be able to look at events unfolding around us but also to look through them, above them and beneath them to perceive what is truly happening.

We need, then, two sound tracks—one to tell the story and the other to tell God's deepest truth about the story. John wants us to go to this ordinary dinner party in Bethany, but not to miss the hint of resurrection we can see in Lazarus. He wants us to hear Judas's pious speech about caring for the poor but also to discern in those words the treachery that lies in the human heart. He wants us to see Mary not just as hostess but as prophet. He wants us to see her anointing of Jesus not as a mere impulse of indulgence, but as a costly act of worship. Jesus is not merely eating and drinking with friends—he is the lamb at the Passover feast, and John wants us to smell the fragrance of the perfume that fills the house as the aroma of holy death. John whispers between the lines of the story because he wants us to see what is truly happening, and to believe.

Some time ago, I returned as the guest preacher to a church where years before I had served as a student pastor. After the service, I struck up a conversation with a woman whom I had not seen in many years. "How is your dad?" I asked her. "I remember him as one of my favorite people."

"I lost my dad last summer," she said sadly. "Cancer. But he lived a long and good life," she added, "and in many ways he died a peaceful death. The last few moments of his life were amazing.

"My sister, my brother and I were with him when he died. He had a stroke a few days before and lost his speech. You can imagine how hard that was on my father."

"Yes," I nodded. "Your father loved to talk, loved to tell a good story."

“About an hour before he died, he began a hard struggle. He was using this last bit of energy to try to speak. He seemed to have something he really wanted to communicate. It was terribly frustrating for him and painful to watch. Finally he pointed at my brother and motioned toward the sink in his room. My sister said, ‘He wants some water,’ and my brother went to the sink and poured a glass. He brought it over to my father, but Dad refused it and made a gesture toward my brother as if to say, ‘No, you drink it.’ My brother hesitated for a moment and then took a sip from the glass. My father then motioned with his hand, as if to say, ‘Pass it to your sister.’ My brother handed me the glass, and my father repeated the gesture.

“It was then that it dawned on my sister. ‘He’s serving communion,’ she said quietly.”

Through these gestures, her father communicated that this was no ordinary hospital room, but a chapel; no ordinary dying, but a sacred and faithful death. In an even deeper way, Mary’s anointing made the house at Bethany into a sanctuary and transformed that meal into a Eucharist “showing forth the Lord’s death until he comes.” The whole world is now filled with the fragrance of that perfume.