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Nadia Bolz Weber, Predigt/Talk anlässlich der theologischen Tagung «Frisch und Weise», Basel, 26.-28.4.2019

A few months ago I posted on Twitter that I was inviting women into a sort of swords into ploughshares project - I invited them to mail in their purity rings- these rings that conservative Christians in America would make girls as young as 11 wear as a promise that they would not have sex until their wedding night – I asked the grown women who had their sexuality shut down by the church to mail them in for an art project - so that we could melt them into a sculpture of a vagina.

It had been a long-held dream of mine and the day had come to put the idea out into the world and of course within an hour of announcing the project a man responded. “Actually, is this the best way to empower women? I mean shouldn't the rings be sold, and the money given to support women's ministries?”

In our Gospel for today Lazraus' sister Mary does something beautiful, risks something extravagant, offers something devastating in it's beauty and in response Judas comments – “actually, isnt that problematic – I mean, wouldn't it be better if this Nard was sold and the proceeds given to the poor” Which makes me think, man would Judas have loved Twitter. Judas was like, MADE for twitter.

Anyway, a couple years ago I heard my friend Doug Gay preach a sermon about Mary, Martha and Lazarus that changed forever how I read their story. He had found himself puzzling over something I had never noticed before – namely, why is it that Lazarus never says anything.

I mean, Lazarus gets a lot of screentime, so to speak – there's so much written about him and yet he never says a word. Not when he stumbles out of his own tomb and not at this macabre little dinner party. So, my friend Doug wondered if perhaps Lararus couldn't speak. That maybe the one who Jesus loved – maybe the one person we know Jesus cried over – maybe the one person Jesus deemed so valuable that he would not allow death to take him – maybe this one person wasn't verbal. My friend Doug asked - what if Lazarus was Mary and Martha's wee brother with Down's Syndrome.

I think I stopped breathing for a minute when I heard that.

The reason it took my breath away when Doug said this in his sermon is that whether or not it is a fact that Lazarus was a special needs kid, it just seems totally true to me given everything I know about Jesus.

It seems true to me because Jesus walked around like he definitely didn't understand the rules, like he didn't understand who supposedly mattered and who supposedly didn't.

I am Christian because whether or not it is a fact that the person Jesus chose to raise from the dead was a special needs kid, my Christian faith tells me that this is the truest thing I have ever heard.

It seems true because Jesus loved despite the expectations of this world. It seems true because of how Jesus kept saying that the things we think are so important rarely are things like holding grudges and making judgements and hording wealth and being first. Things like status and propriety and what people say on Twitter.

It seems true because Jesus was a death defeating man. The death from societal isolation. The death from domination. The death from empire.

When Jesus called Lazarus out of his grave, it was as if before Jesus defeated death for good – he wanted to just embarrass it a little, like give it a good slap in the face.

So, I think that his sister, the prophet Mary of Bethany did what she did at that dinner party because she understood this. And because she understood this, she was a free woman.

The fact that her hair was unbound signals to me that the things that she used to worry about no longer mattered to her. If it was written today maybe it would say – Mary took off her Spanx. Controlling her muffin top could not have mattered less. It was not just her hair that was unbound – it was everything. Mary was transformed and yet still herself. Mary was free.

Free from caring what other people thought of her. Free from self-consciousness. Free from self-loathing. Free from her old ideas about herself. Free from societal expectation and respectability politics and worrying about what things cost. Free from caring about muffin tops and mansplainers... She was a free woman.

And *that* is why I am Christian, because I am in this for the freedom, the kind of freedom that comes from God disrupting the things we think are so important. The kind of freedom that comes from having something taken away that I thought I could not live without and then living without it anyway. The kind of freedom that comes not from getting what I want, but from getting what I didn't realize I needed. This freedom cannot be earned. It can only come from grace.

And the reason I am obsessed with grace is because everything else in this bankrupt world feels like it's about worthiness...it's about knowing who we are better than and looking out for number one. Everything else is about holding grudges and making judgements and hording wealth and being first.

Everything else I have been offered in life be it from social media or the wellness industry or higher education feels like it all about just trying harder. But I've tried trying harder and it doesn't make me free – it just makes me tired.

Maybe you too vow each morning to try harder. Maybe you too start each day with some self-talk like I do, today I won't eat compulsively or i'll not yell at my kids or I'll not spend money I don't have on things I don't need. Today, unlike yesterday I won't flirt with my married co-worker or look up my ex-boyfriend on facebook. Today I will finally stand up for myself. Today I will not play video games. Today I really will look for a job. Today I will for sure start that Keto diet. Today I will start meditating and

become a vegan and start training for a marathon and go back to college and go to the container store so I can organize my closet and be in control. But we're not. We're not in control. That would be the point. We're addicted to people, and praise and possessions and power.

And we so easily put our hope in poison as if it's medicine.

And then Jesus, comes along and says stop giving death a makeover and calling it life. Jesus comes along to show us that there is a difference between fake news and good news. Jesus comes along and says to my own internal Judas – to the accusing mansplainer Judas voice in my head that voice that keeps sending me to the container store and Jesus says to me *leave her alone*.

Leave her alone.

Mary anointed Jesus for his death because she was free. She was free because she knew the difference between fake news and good news, she was free because she knew that tombs are real, but they are not the most real thing.

This is what we get to have. This is the promise of the Christian faith. Tombs in all their forms are real but they are not the most real thing.

I am Christian because the Gospel of Jesus Christ saves me in a way my pride cannot save me. In a way the self-awareness and self-preservation and self-improvement cannot save me, in a way that success cannot save me.

I am Christian because all of the vain things that charm me most. Do. Not. Stack. Up. Not in the way I think they will.

Mary knew this.

Mary had seen how her messiah had brought life out of death and having seen it, having touched it, having smelled it she didn't have the choice but to live it. When she anointed Jesus feet and wiped them with her unbound hair it was not an act of impropriety as the onlookers thought, it was not an act of super-duper discipleship as we might think, it was TESTIMONY.

Because to her resurrection was not just some nice story...a thing to read aloud and put back on the shelf. Resurrection, or more specifically the wild ability of God to bring corpses out of the tomb...to bring babies out of barren wombs...to bring forth water from rock, and make life out of death.....this is the kind of thing you live, not just the kind of thing you consider. We live this. We don't just believe this.

That is the purpose of our testimonies. This is the purpose of telling what God has done. We recall what God has done not so we can live vicariously in history or somehow build monuments to moments past...We don't remember what God has done out of nostalgia.

We remember what God has done so that when we see God in the present, we recognize what God looks like.

This is what God looks like in real time my friends

This room, these words, these people, these breaths, this testimony, this bread, this wine. Thanks be to God. Amen.