**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS (#4)**

***Mary’s Memorial Service (Matt. 26)***

What would it feel like to get up in the morning and read in the paper (does anybody actually do that anymore?), or on the internet, that you had died the previous day and that your funeral was going to be held this weekend? I don’t know about you but that would sure make me pinch myself, take my pulse and blow on the mirror to see if I fogged it up and was thus still alive.

Samuel Clemens, better known in the literate world by his pen name Mark Twain, was on a speaking tour of Europe and had a speech to give in London in May of 1897. The *New York Journal* newspaper asked their London correspondent Frank White to find out if the rumor was true that Twain was either deathly sick or had died. Mr. White found Twain very much alive and well. He then showed him the telegram from New York. He told White to write this in reply: “The report of my death was an exaggeration.” But the legend of this reply grew until in 1912 (two years after Twain did actually die) a book was written about him in which he was reported to have said, “Tell them this, ‘The report of my death has been grossly exaggerated.’”

The same thing happened to Alfred Nobel, for whom the Nobel Peace Prize is named. His brother Ludwig had died in 1888 and a French newspaper mistakenly published Alfred’s obituary and used as the headline, “Dr. Alfred Nobel, the Merchant of Death is dead.” They went on to say, “Dr. Nobel became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday.” Nobel’s invention of dynamite, which he created to bring peace by using as an explosive for easier mining and construction projects (think of blasting mountains away so as to make road building and railroad routes much easier), had been turned into an instrument for war. He was so horrified by this thought of how he would be remembered that he used his vast fortune (in today’s currency it was worth $186,000,000) to establish annual prizes in five categories: physics, chemistry, medicine, literature and peace. Attaching his name to the advancement of science and peace has left him a positive legacy to be remembered.

But let’s go back beyond the 19th century when Twain and Nobel lived and examine the incredible personal encounter a young woman had with Jesus. The Lord had been invited, once again, to eat dinner in the small village of Bethany (two miles outside the walls of Jerusalem). It seems He often escaped to this place to find rest and peace, for here lived His dear friends Lazarus and his two sisters Martha and Mary. While we know He had eaten at their house (Luke 10:38-42), we find Him now in the same neighborhood at the home of Simon the leper.

Read this encounter from three accounts (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8).

Picture this scene. Jesus is the guest of honor and seated at the favored place at the table. Lazarus, who had just recently been resurrected and was the talk of the town, is probably next to him, reclining in the usual customary way. Simon, who had no doubt been healed of his leprosy by Jesus, was on His other side. The apostles are all reclining around the U-shaped table to allow Martha to serve them. Once again Mary is not helping her (cf. Lk. 10:40). Why? The last time it was because she chose to sit at His feet and learn, not stand in the kitchen to cook soup and make bread.

But this time she was absent because she was down the street at her house rummaging through her Hope Chest to find the family heirloom she had been saving for such a time as this. What was that valuable heirloom? “*An alabaster flask of very costly perfume*.”

Judas, an appraiser of such expensive things due to his love of money, would later value this bottle of perfume as equal to a full year’s wage for a common laborer (300 denarii). In today’s currency it would have a price tag of between $24,000 to $36,000 (depending on an hourly wage of either $10 or $15 x 8 hours a day x 300 days).

While they are eating Mary comes rushing into the dining room and, without warning, holds the flask over Jesus’ head and suddenly breaks it open to allow the entire contents to pour down upon Him. The oil runs down His head, His clothes, and all the way to down to His feet! The entire house, previously smelling of lentils and lamb, is now powerfully engulfed in an aroma of extraordinary sweetness. Momentarily everyone sat stunned, speechless, amazed, at this turn of events.

Then reality sat in. One by one they begin to criticize Mary for her prodigal display of stupidity! They are unified in condemning her as foolish for this “*waste*.” Think of the *poor* that could have been fed. Think of all the *good* that could have been done. They all agree that this was an act of madness. I’m sure someone muttered, “What on earth were you thinking Mary?”

“Quiet!” Jesus stops this criticism with a sharp rebuke. “*Why do you trouble Mary, she has done a good work for Me. She has done this to anoint My body for burial. She has done what she could*.” As she now sits at His feet, rubbing them with oil and wiping them with her hair, I can just see Him look down at her and with a reassuring smile touch her face with approval. She is the only one in this room who “gets it.”

She believed Jesus when He constantly told these hard-of-hearing and hard-of-heart apostles that He was about to suffer and die. He had said it over and over again (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; Lk. 17:25) but they had refused to believe Him. Not Mary. She not only believed Him, she began to set in motion a plan to give Him flowers before He died. When she heard Him say, *“I must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day,”* she planned His funeral while He lived*.* He had just raised her brother from death, proving beyond all doubt His claim to be God’s Son, so she would honor Him with a royal Memorial Service.

What did Jesus think of this personal close encounter? “*Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.”* What she had planned to be His memorial, turned out to be her own. Here we are 2,000 years later still talking about Mary’s love.

If you could be like Mark Twain or Alfred Nobel and hear what others thought of the summary of your life, what would they most remember about you? Your professional achievements? Academic honors? Athletic prowess? Financial success? Family legacy? Mr. Nobel changed his obituary from violence to peace. That’s fine. But I would rather others remember me as a servant and disciple of Christ who “*has done what he could*.”

What will be the remembrance of your life?

I love you. - Rick