

THE CRONE

by
Elizabeth G. Watson

“IN MEMORY OF HER”

Mark 14:3–9

See also

Matthew 26:6–13

Luke 7:36–50

John 12:1–8

Introduction

Jesus and his friends have made the long journey from Galilee to Judea, and the tragic events of his last days begin to unfold. A few days before the Passover, a man whom Jesus had healed of leprosy invites him and the twelve men of his inner circle to dinner. A woman makes her way into this male gathering and anoints Jesus with costly perfume.

This basic story with variations appears in all four Gospels.

John makes him a guest of Lazarus in Bethany. We are told that Martha serves the dinner and Mary is the anointer. The women keep their familiar roles!

Luke sets his story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, before he goes to Galilee. Luke's anointer is “a woman of the city, a great sinner.” In both Luke and John the feet are anointed.

Matthew and **Mark** tell virtually the same story. Because Mark's is the oldest of the stories, it is probably closer to what actually happened.

Mark's story reads:

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the jar and poured it over his head. But there were some

who said to themselves indignantly, “Why was the ointment thus wasted? It might have been sold for more than three hundred silver pieces and given to the poor.” And they reproached her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

Who was this woman who made her way into a male gathering? Her action seemed to the men extravagant and inappropriate. What did it mean to her? Why did she anoint his head rather than his feet? What gave her the courage to do what she did?

As I have placed myself inside Mark’s story, and lived with it, turning it to see it from many angles, and as I have brainstormed the story in workshops with other women, I have come to the conclusion that this woman was old, and that she was a woman of intuitive wisdom and healing power. In the light of this conviction, I have called the story *The Crone*. I tell it in memory of her.¹

THE CRONE

I saw what was going to happen. The priests and pharisees were jealous of him because he knew more scripture than they did, because of his healing power, and because of the great crowds that came to him. I saw them watching him in the Temple and I knew they would not rest until they had done away with him. I saw that they would move against him very soon.

Does no one know who he is? Am I the only one still alive who knows that this man, of the house and lineage of David, was born to be King, that it was all foretold in the stars at the time of his birth? Oh, I knew from the beginning that he would not drive out the Romans and set himself up as a temporal ruler. He was born for greater things. I watched him cast himself in the role of servant, and at the same time he said that the servant of all would be the greatest among them. Would he now go to his death without ever having been recognized, anointed, consecrated?

I remembered how Samuel had been told to go to Jesse and anoint one of his sons King. Jesse had brought out seven sons, and each time God told Samuel "not this one." Then, under Samuel's pressure, Jesse sent for his youngest, a shepherd, and it is written:

Now David was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and he was handsome... and the Lord said, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he..." ...And the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David.²

And I thought, Jesus too is ruddy, and handsome, and has beautiful eyes. And Oh, how the Spirit of the Lord has come mightily upon this descendent of David.

I looked at the men among his disciples, all afraid for their lives now. None of them would do it, certainly not at my asking. I believed that this symbolic act would consecrate his death, would comfort him and give him strength to face it. And so, although no

King of Israel has ever been anointed by a woman, I had to do it. I had no choice.

How long have I carried this knowledge in my heart? For the last thirty-three years it has never been out of my mind.

Let me tell you my story. My mother died giving me birth and I was taken in by my grandmother. She was known as "the crone," as I am today. I grew up in her small hut in the hills near Bethlehem. I early learned from her the various herbs for healing, how and when to harvest them, how to dry them. Even when I was small, she took me with her to deliver babies, for she had no one with whom to leave me. By the time I was ten, I had delivered a child myself.

She also taught me to read the heavens, and to foretell events from the position of the planets and constellations. We were both night people. Many nights we would climb a hill near our hut and watch the stars come into view on the horizon and slowly cross the sky. Sometimes we watched until dawn turned the eastern sky faintly pink. Then we went home and slept away the heat of the day.

It was a strange girlhood, for I had no friends my own age. I did not run and play as children do. I loved my grandmother and eagerly learned all she could teach me. Early I knew I shared her gift of healing. And I have her gift of prophecy too and of seeing the deeper meaning of things.

Before she died, my grandmother took me once more to the lean-to shed by our house and made me go over all the herbs and ointments until she was satisfied that I really knew all she could teach me. "Now," she said, "I can die in peace." I live now as she lived, in the same little hut, gathering my herbs in their season. People love and trust me and call me when they need me.

And I continue to watch the heavens for signs. I know the waxing and waning of the moon; I know when they will move close to each other and there will be a "conjunction." Every twenty

years there is a conjunction of Jupiter with Saturn. I have seen it three times now, the first time with my grandmother.

She said that the next time of conjunction, Jupiter and Saturn would be opposite the Sun (from our point of view on earth) and that this time it would be a triple conjunction — that is, the two planets would move close to each other three times within a few months. They would not meld into a single point of light, she said, but would be close enough to illuminate the whole night sky.

She did not live to see that, but I watched for it. This time the conjunction took place in the constellation Pisces. I was greatly excited, for Pisces is associated with our people, the Hebrews, and Jupiter is a sign of a world ruler. Someone of very great importance to the whole world was about to be born among our people.

Days passed and the second conjunction took place. This time the whole sky was lit and the two planets seemed to be shining right over our little town of Bethlehem. In great excitement I left the hill, and made my way to the village. The dark streets were bright tonight and I walked to the center of the town where the inn is, not knowing where to go, but knowing I must go.

The inn-keeper's wife was coming out the door with her cloak on, and when she saw me she rushed up to me. She had been starting out to find me. Earlier that evening her husband had turned a couple away, because there was no room. They had been offered shelter in a cave behind the inn, used as a stable. The woman was in the last stages of pregnancy, and now her labor had begun.

I always go prepared, with packets of herbs and ointment tucked into my girdle. I sent the inn-keeper's wife back for hot water and clean linen and I hurried to the cave. The man was quite distraught because his wife was in great pain, but she thanked me for coming so quickly. I gave her something to ease the pain, and when the hot water came, I made a potion to hasten her contractions.

And so I was there to ease his mother's pain and to bring him into the world. I held him as he drew his first breaths. What a beautiful child he was. He was ruddy and when he opened his eyes I saw that they were beautiful. He might have been David's son. I asked the man why they were on the road when the birth was so near. He told me that he had had to come to Bethlehem for the enrollment for paying taxes, which the Emperor had ordered. Because he was of David's lineage, Bethlehem was his place of enrollment. It all fitted together.

I thought how fitting that a future world leader should be born in a stable, to a peasant woman, in an occupied country in a remote corner of the mighty Roman Empire.

I went back each day to make sure that mother and child were all right, but I also went because I loved to hold that beautiful baby in my arms and feel his response to my love.

On the twelfth night the third and final conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn lit up the sky, seemingly right over the stable. The little family had had many visitors. People in the town brought food and little gifts for the baby. Shepherds wandered in, their shaggy dogs quietly watching.

This night, however, there were visitors who had come a long way, Parthian astrologers who, in Babylon, had seen the first conjunction and known its meaning. They set out at once on their camels across the desert to find this newborn king, bringing him costly gifts: resin from the frankincense tree that grows at the southern end of the Arabian peninsula, and resin from the myrrh tree. These were rare gifts. They also brought gold.

They came with a warning. They had gone first to Jerusalem, supposing that the new king would be born there. They had met Herod and surmised he would try to destroy the child. Then the final conjunction led them to the stable. Almost immediately the little family left the stable, hoping to get to Egypt safely.

I saw him only occasionally during his childhood. I kept track of him, however, and when he was in Judea I tried to be where he

was without intruding. I knew when he came for the first time for the Passover and frightened his family by remaining in the Temple talking to the wise men.

I was in the crowd when John baptized him in the Jordan River. When most of the people had left, I went to him and told him that I had brought him into the world and that I knew what had been told in the sky when he was born. He told me he would go into the desert for a time, to clarify his mission and his message. I could see that he would reject violence and temporal power. The Spirit of the Lord was already on him. He would be no ordinary king.

I had my own people to look after so I did not join the others identified as his followers, but I counted myself his disciple. Some were called to travel with him; others to stay where they were, like the family in Bethany. No one was closer to him than Martha and Mary and their brother Lazarus. Their home was his home when he was in Judea. I saw that he called women to be his friends and followers, as well as men, and I was glad. I came to know some of them and to love them.

And now there was not much time left for him. My grandmother had told me of an ancient tradition, older than David, that the true test of kingship is willingness to give up one's life for one's people. A king would know the right time. Although he was descended from David, he was also linked to kings who before the times of domination and violence had ruled with love and forbearance, kings willing to give up their own lives instead of seeking power over others.³

And now I made my preparations. I took from under my straw pallet a small drawstring bag with coins, all the money I had. I counted them carefully and then I went to the dealer in oils and ointments. I had brought his children into the world and saved his son's life when he had a high fever. He greeted me warmly.

I spread out my coins and told him I needed an aromatic oil, something suitable for anointing. He brought out several oils but

none seemed quite right. He saw my disappointment and asked if it were for someone important and I nodded. He hesitated a moment, and then brought out a small, very beautiful alabaster bottle. The jar was sealed, but even so I was aware of a faint and lovely odor. He told me it was oil of spikenard which grows high in the mountains of India. I knew it was right, but I also knew that my small purse could not afford it. I hesitated. Then he said, "Take it," and added that it was fit to anoint a high priest, or even a king. I thanked him, bowed, and left.

I made my way around Jerusalem to Bethany and went to the house of Martha, where his friends often congregated. From her I learned that the next night he would have dinner with a man named Simon whom he had healed of leprosy.

The next night I stood inconspicuously near Simon's house, my precious little bottle in my hand. I saw Jesus and his friends gather and go in to the meal.

When they were all at the table, I quietly entered and went to the place where Jesus lay on his couch at the table. I broke the seal on the bottle and poured all the costly oil on his beautiful head and laid my hands on him in blessing. The lovely odor filled the room and drew everyone's eyes to what I was doing. Thus I anointed him King of Kings, for all time.

I had thought, naively, that they would recognize this anointing of a great soul as a holy act. They were frightened and confused and discouraged, and one of them said, "What was the use of wasting that? The ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor." Others took up the complaint. They were angry at what I had done.

Jesus silenced them. His voice rang out, "Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing for me." He told them they could do good to the poor any time, but he would not be with them much longer. The mention of his impending death silenced them.

Jesus went on more quietly, "She has done what she had to do. She has anointed me before my burial, and I tell you that

wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

And no one there, except Jesus, even knew my name!

I left quietly, my heart aching for him. I thought of the narrow-mindedness of those who see things in terms of money. I grieve for those who never make the extravagant gesture, who never spend all they have to give a luxurious gift to someone they love, who never pour out the whole contents of the bottles of their lives in devotion. I remembered hearing Jesus say that the Realm of God is like a buyer looking for fine pearls. When he finds an unusually beautiful one, he sells everything he has to buy it.⁴ O ye blind and niggardly of heart, life is meant to be spent!

I walked to Martha's house and found there all the women I had come to love: the Marys, the one from Magdala, his own mother, and the Mary who is married to Clopas; also Joanna and Susanna, and that refreshingly outspoken woman who is mother of two of the disciples, James and John. And there were many others.

I told them what had happened. They understood and were glad that I had had the foresight to anoint him. And I was comforted. They will not desert him, whatever may happen. They will be there until the end, and even beyond the end. And they will be there to comfort the men and help them understand, though the men will probably not relish being taught by women.

I will stay in Jerusalem until what is to be has come to be, and then I will go home and climb the hill, watching the stars and the planets and the moon night after night in eternal procession. I know that his story will be told as long as the earth endures. "And all will be well and all manner of thing will be well."⁵

So I have told my story, in memory of him.

FOOTNOTES

1. For the astronomical/astrological information in this story, I am indebted to "Starshine," and her research into possible explanations for the Christmas star. The material is used with her permission. Starshine is a member of the Friends Meeting in Helena, Montana.
2. 1 Samuel 16:12,13.
3. See Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*. Harper and Row 1979, p. 32.
4. See Matthew 13:45.
5. Echoing Julian of Norwich.

One of five stories told by Elizabeth Watson during the Bible half-hours each morning at New England Yearly Meeting in August 1990. The Crone is available along with the other stories on audio cassette tapes. For copies of this series, known as "The Gospel According to Women," write to Neil Blanchard, 49 Freemont Street, Marlborough, MA 01752.

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