

*Meeting the People of Passion Week, Pt 2*

## ***Mary of Bethany***

*Matthew 26: 6-13*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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Gerrit Scott Dawson**

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If you knew that Jesus would be crucified within the week, what would you want to say to him? What would you give him that might ease his way? A word? A gift? A service? What would you do to give him the comfort that he was loved by you? These are the questions that stirred inside the woman we know as Mary of Bethany.

Her sister would be furious. She could just hear Martha now, “There she goes again. Mary the dreamer. Mary the romantic. She never thinks. She never counts the cost. She just does whatever comes into her heart to do. And leaves the rest of us to clean it up.”

Mary had gone to the special hiding place in their home where the heirloom was kept. She had taken out the alabaster flask and hidden it in her robes. Tonight would be the night. She would break open the bottle and pour the thick oil onto Jesus. Not just any ointment. This nard, this pungent, glossy, rich ointment came from a plant found only in faraway northern India. It was worth a year’s wages. The ointment in its alabaster flask had been passed down for generations in their family. You didn’t use it. You just kept it, as an asset against hard times. As a trust from your loved ones long gone.

The three siblings had inherited from their parents. Mary, Martha and Lazarus were young adults of some means. Their parents had died, and they lived together comfortably. They were responsible to keep the family interests strong, to take a supportive, giving role in the community, and to keep sound the good name of the family. Well, Martha and Lazarus were responsible. Mary had always been criticized for being impulsive. Not counting the cost. Just doing what she felt while Martha kept the home ordered and Lazarus ran the business. “What earthly good are you anyway?” her sister had said more than once.

But people loved Mary. They were drawn to her. She was fun, passionate, pretty, and kind. She seemed to know just what people were thinking before they said it. She felt what they were feeling, sometimes before they even knew themselves what emotions were coursing through them. Of course, that only made

Martha angrier. That Mary was the popular one, the beloved one, even though she did the least for the family. Mary brought home strays. Mary stood up for people who had deserved to be scorned; she always tried to see things through their eyes. Mary never listened to instructions. She was always off watching the clouds, or listening to the birds, or wandering in the hills. She loved life. Even if she wasn't very good at making a living. She loved people. Even though they often took advantage of her trust. "Yes," she thought, as she took the flask. "I am the dreamer. I am the romantic. I can't help it. And I don't care. He needs care. The others don't see it. They think he can just go and go and never be affected by all that hate, all that scorn. He's tired. And his enemies will not let up. They're going to get him. This week. At Passover. He doesn't have much time. And he needs to know how much I love him."

Of course Mary loved Jesus. Her brother Lazarus was one of the very few people Jesus could love as a friend. Not as a disciple. Not as a student. Not as a ministry opportunity. But someone he could trust. Jesus relaxed when he ate at their home. He laughed. He spoke the most beautiful words about God. But not as a teacher, not with them, just what was in his heart. He loved his heavenly Father. He loved the world. He cared so much for people. It hurt him so deeply to be misunderstood. To be rejected. To have his love turned away. And he could share all of that with them.

Mary knew their family was special to Jesus. So special that Jesus had let them go through a crushing week. Lazarus had gotten sick. They sent for Jesus. He did not come. He did not come until Lazarus had already died. Until they already had the funeral. Until Lazarus was already sealed away in the tomb. Jesus let her brother grow ill, die, and be wrapped for burial. When at last he came, Mary gushed her tears and sobbed out her words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus looked at his friend Mary. He saw her distress, and the sorrow of all the friends and relatives who had followed her. Deep in his spirit, anger rolled through Jesus. His face, normally calm like a still lake, twitched and scrunched like troubled waters roiling in the wind. He made no direct reply to Mary. He just asked a question, "Where have you laid him?" And then he wept. His heart just broke. For his friend's death. For his other friend's sorrow. For the way the world is, full of leave-taking and grieving, every moment laced with loss.

Lazarus was four days dead when Jesus, great emotion bubbling inside him, rage at death, wrath at the sorrow, ordered the stone to be rolled away. He lifted his eyes heavenward and prayed to his Father. Then he cried out with a loud voice,

“Lazarus, come out!” And Mary’s dead brother, bound head and foot in grave clothes, came out of the tomb alive once more. Oh, how Jesus loved his friends with such a severe love, that he would let his friend Lazarus die and be dead, in order to raise him and restore the family and give proof that all this dying will not have the final word.

Mary, Martha and Lazarus wanted to host a great feast of thanks for Jesus and his disciples. They held the dinner at the home of another grateful disciple, Simon, whom Jesus had healed of leprosy. This was a celebration of Jesus who came to end decay and death because he came to end the sin that brought it all into the world.

No one was thinking about what lay ahead. Except Mary. Of course she loved a party. She knew how to celebrate. But she intuited more. This was going to be a farewell dinner. Great things had happened. But nothing was going to be the same after tonight. She just knew it. Her family had heard the whispers. Jesus’ enemies sought to kill her brother because Lazarus was living proof of Jesus’ power. Mary knew that meant they intended to kill Jesus as well. He would not survive teaching openly in Jerusalem during Passover week. The people wanted to make him king. The authorities could not let that happen. He was going to be seized. Mary knew it. And she, unlike the others, had remembered how Jesus said it would be so. He never expected to live to be an old man. He never expected to reign as a king. He shared it with them earlier. Jesus knew he would die.

Mary could not let him go into this week without knowing how she loved him. How grateful she was. How worried she was. How she wished she could spare him the suffering. And if not save him from it altogether, then soothe him along the way. She wanted to do something for Jesus that would give him comfort in the days to come. She didn’t care about cost or consequence. He had to know.

There are moments in life when you realize, “This is what life is about. This is the reason I have been living. It’s time to stop and notice it. This is the reason why I have been working. It’s time to savor what matters most. It’s not what I have to get done. It’s these people. This person. It’s this word of love. It’s this gesture of devotion. The whole point, the reason for everything, is right here before me. And I’m not going to miss it.”

After the dinner was well under way, Mary approached Jesus from behind. He was reclining at the table. His left elbow was propped on a cushion. His right hand was free to reach to the bowls of steaming hot food. His legs were stretched

out to his right side. The ointment, worth a year's wages, was sealed in the alabaster flask. There was no cork. No screw top. She opened it by snapping the thin neck of the jar near the top. Once opened, this ointment had to be used. Immediately its aroma filled the room. Quickly people noticed. Conversation ended. All eyes turned toward Mary. It was now or never.

She stepped close to Jesus and poured the thick, perfumed oil from the flask onto his head. Oil for hair and beard were not unusual at a special dinner. It was a courtesy for guests. But that would be ordinary oil. Not this rare nard. Never this once in a lifetime gift. It smelled expensive. It smelled like royalty. This was the kind of anointing oil used to set apart a king.

Would Jesus receive such a gift? Would he wave her away? Would this be another of Mary's grand, but crashing futile gestures? No, he did not flinch. He received it. He accepted the gift. Mary gently massaged the oil into his hair. Jesus sighed. He relaxed. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. As she touched him, Mary prayed, "Father, bless this man, your Son. Father comfort him for the days ahead. May he know he is loved. May he know he is not alone. See him through. He is your anointed one, your Christ. May the aroma of this ointment strengthen him with hope."

Beyond plan, Mary noticed there was more nard left and she impulsively moved to Jesus' feet. She took the posture of a servant. But she did not wash those road worn feet with water. She anointed them with expensive perfumed oil. The room was uncomfortably silent. But Jesus did not protest. And no one dared interrupt the master's moment of repose. Mary blocked out all the world except for those feet. As she massaged, she sent all her heart to Jesus in silent words.

Receive this. I know the wind rises stronger against you.  
I know that you go to meet those who will kill you.

Oh, receive this!  
You know you have my heart. Now have this gift.  
It is fit for a king. It brings the aroma of royalty.  
Its odor will linger through these days.

Breathe it in. Let the pungency rise amidst  
The smells of tears, strain and fear, of sweat and blood.  
I touch your hair, your head, with this oil.  
You do not flinch as I dare to come so close.

I wash your feet with the oil of kings, and  
Give you all glory as I wipe your tired feet with my hair.  
O receive this and remember love as you stride into hate.

When all the oil was gone, the moment was over, and Mary at last looked up to see the room full of uncomfortable people. The disciples were beside themselves with jealousy. They protested that the ointment could have been sold and the money given to the poor. But they didn't care about the poor. They were envious of how she had touched Jesus. They realized she had done more for him than they ever did. They wanted Jesus to slam her for being so forward. But he didn't.

Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me. She prepared me for my burial. And what she has done will always be remembered.

A beautiful thing. Jesus called her extravagant, over the top act a beautiful thing. He received her love and accepted it fully into his heart.

Jesus would continue through this Passion Week in a paradox of aromas. Probably, he would not bathe again. The smell of royal anointing would reach anyone who got near him. It would be in his own nostrils as well. Rare perfumed nard would soon mingle with the smells of arrest, trial and crucifixion. The smell of sweating blood in the garden of Gethsemane. The gamey smell of rough soldiers. The smell of stress and bodily fear. The locker-room smell at the whipping post. Oozing wounds from the scourging. The smell of a crowd lining the way to Golgotha. The wood and nails smell of the cross. And weaving through all the horror, he would catch the scent of royalty, of Messiah, the anointed one. He would remember who he was, and that he was loved. Even in death, the aroma of a king would still be about him.

*She has done a beautiful thing for me.*

Let's return to our first question, "What would you want to give Jesus to ease his way?" I've had time to think about it and lots of things came to mind. A soft cloth to wipe his brow on the way to the cross. A love note tucked into his robe. A song that would please him. A hand on his shoulder and a blessing. But none of those quite did it. I wanted to be more child-like. I wanted to go deeper. What I settled on surprised me. I thought of a little stuffed animal my mother brought me when I had been sick for over a week. A black dog to hold. That toy dog comforted me with a mother's love, and hope that things would get better. I still have it, for it is precious to me. But I would give it to him. Not for any value it

has in itself, not because I think a stuffed animal would have really helped Jesus on the cross. But the black dog means loving comfort to me, tender regard, kindness and hope. I would want him to have that.

What would you have wanted to give him? Do you think Mary ever regretted giving the heirloom gift during Passion Week? Do we ever regret, after someone has died, having told them how much we love them? Do we regret giving a valuable birthday gift to someone who would pass away within the month? No, no, we only wish we had said more, done more, given more. Will we ever regret that we have adored Jesus more explicitly? Will we wish we hadn't worshipped him so much? Or loved little ones and lost ones in his name? Will we ever look back on a year and say, "Oh how I wish I had watched more TV! Oh I wished I had spent more money on myself! Oh I wish I had skipped worship more." No, never.

What would you have wanted to give Jesus to soothe him along his way. Take some time today or later this week to be very still and imagine doing just that. Offer him love, some sign of comfort and affection. And then imagine him looking at you, full in the face, right in the eyes, and saying, "You have done a beautiful thing for me." Listen to his voice say those words to you, perhaps speak them aloud, "You have done a beautiful thing for me." For he does say that, even now, when you offer him genuine signs of your love. Take it from Mary of Bethany, it's worth everything.