

John12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."*

Leave Her Alone - April 3, 2022

John 12:1-8

What an extraordinary gift! What an extravagant gift! What a ridiculous gift! All these are potential reactions to the gift Mary gave to Jesus. As we learned from today's gospel reading, Mary poured expensive perfume all over Jesus, even wiping his feet with her hair. She was honoring her friend, that man who brought her brother back to life. She was worshipping her Lord and Savior.

How dare she? I mean really, what business did Mary have doing such a thing? We learn that Mary pours a jar of perfume that cost a year's wages! How was that possible? I mean scripture doesn't tell us much about Mary, her sister Martha, and her brother Lazarus. Perhaps they were rich, perhaps not. We don't really know the family finances. Nevertheless, even if you are wealthy, you would never break a bottle of Chanel No 5 and pour the contents over someone all at once! Even if the money didn't matter, we still know that it's too much of a good thing. I don't know much about perfume, but I do know that it's used sparingly. A little goes a long way. You're certainly not supposed to be overpowered by perfume, just a hint of scent is enough.

So the word extraordinary is quite appropriate in terms of describing what Mary did for Jesus. Pouring out the perfume is something nobody has done or will do ever. It was truly a gift without comparison.

No doubt the gift was extravagant. For almost all of us, the only thing we own that represents a year's wages or more is our homes. Most of us live in houses that cost considerably more than what we earn. Nothing we possess even comes close. Why would she do such a thing? Yes, she was grateful that Jesus was her friend. Yes, she was grateful that she raised Lazarus her brother from the dead. Nonetheless, wasn't the perfume simply over the top? Wasn't it way too much of a good thing?

Certainly Judas thought so. Now the scripture points out that Judas thought Mary's gift was ridiculous. He pointed out that if Mary really wanted to do something useful, the perfume should have been sold and the money given to poor people. Of course, the text reminds us that Judas was a thief and would probably have stolen some of the proceeds from the sale of the perfume. We also learn Judas was shortly going to betray Jesus. Yet Judas' hypocrisy notwithstanding, he did have a point. A year's wages was obviously a good sum of money could indeed be used to help people. Is breaking a jar of perfume over Jesus truly the best way to honor him?

Mary was criticized for how she chose to honor Jesus and in response to her critics, Jesus told everyone to leave her alone. In short, if Jesus had no problems with Mary's gift to him, nobody else should have a problem, either.

But Lord, we might say, is Mary's example the one you want us to follow? If that is what you want, well, following you seems to be a very expensive hobby. I mean, a couple dollars here, a couple dollars there, that's fine. But now we're talking real money and that is just way too much.

And yet, is it? Is what Mary did for Jesus so outrageous, so out of line? Consider what Jesus did for Mary. We start with Jesus raising her brother Lazarus from the dead. Something totally unheard of. We don't know how, we don't know why, but Jesus just did it and that's all that matters.

Jesus did more for Mary. When Jesus was in the town of Bethany where Mary lived, he set up shop in Mary and her sister Martha's house. You might recall that as Jesus was preparing to teach the people at Mary's house, Mary sat down to be with Jesus and the others who were there to listen to him. Martha, on the other hand, busied herself with housekeeping and other chores. Martha was so busy, in fact, that she didn't have time to even listen to Jesus. Martha even complained to Jesus that Mary was being lazy by not helping her. But to Martha's surprise, Jesus told Martha that Mary had made the better choice by sitting down to listen to Jesus speak. No question that Jesus appreciated Martha and her work. Nevertheless, Mary made the better choice. Jesus affirmed Mary and her desire to hear Jesus speak.

Finally, it is possible that the Mary in today's story is Mary Magdalene, the woman Jesus rescued from certain death. Mary Magdalene was the one hauled before Jesus and Jesus was told she was committing adultery. The crowd wanted to stone her to death because that was the traditional punishment for adulterers. If you recall the story, Jesus began writing in the dirt at his feet and declared that the one who had no sin could cast the first stone at Mary. The crowd melted away and Jesus was left with only Mary. Some have speculated that Jesus was writing the names of all the men in the crowd who had committed adultery and the men, upon seeing their names, were forced to remember their own sin and guilt and left.

So Jesus saved Mary's life, save her brother's life, and even stood up for her in front of her sister. With all that Jesus had done for her, could you possibly agree that Mary was very justified in pouring expensive perfume all over Jesus? You might say she was thanking Jesus only partially.

Jesus did a lot for Mary and Mary responded to Jesus with a very expensive gift.

The question for us should therefore be, how do we respond to Jesus?

Jesus did so much for Mary and her family. Very obvious things of which many people were aware. We might even say that if Mary had done nothing for Jesus, she would have been guilty of ingratitude.

OK, that's fine for Mary, but what about you and me? Has Jesus done as much for us as he did for Mary? Should we be responding to Jesus with equal extravagance, and equal foolishness?

I guess that depends, doesn't it? Perhaps you thought I'd just say, "Yes, of course" or "No, it's not necessary."

But really, what do you think of Jesus? Who do you think he is? What do you think his life and ministry is about? Really, why is Jesus here and what did he come to do for you?

Obviously this is a very individual and personal question. I would say that how we answer the question may even change over time. We know and God knows that our relationship changes. It gets close and then it fades. Our faith is strong sometimes and sometimes it is almost non-existent.

Now none of us has witnessed our dead brothers being raised to life — or have we? Friends, one of the phrases we repeat every week is that in Jesus we have new life. When we baptize, we speak of our lives being made new as we emerge from the waters. When we have communion, we speak of the bread and the cup filling us with the spirit of Christ, renewing in us the life-giving spirit that is the essence of Jesus.

In fact, can we not say that when we look at it the right way, resurrection is not just something that happened to one man a long time ago. Instead resurrection, in other words, new life from death, is actually something that happens all the time. If we really think about it, we can remember people whose lives have been transformed and restored for no apparent reason. I personally can think of a number of relationships that I thought were dead that suddenly, unexpectedly, came back to life. I don't know how and I don't know why, but they did.

In short, there is much more to resurrection than simply the physical transformation of our bodies. Resurrection can happen equally, or even more frequently, to our minds and our spirits. For Mary, it was unquestionably wonderful to see her brother alive once more. But is that experience any greater or more meaningful than to witness the transformation of the people closest to us? Watching new life and new possibilities come to relationships we thought were dead? Jesus conquers death in all its forms, not merely the physical death of our bodies.

When we give, whether to the church or some other cause, don't we tend to give with one eye on the good we are going but the other eye on our bank account? We tell ourselves we must be generous, but we must also be prudent. But Mary gave without counting the cost. She did not hesitate pouring that entire jar of perfume over Jesus. I doubt she thought even one second about the monetary value

that perfume represented. Instead, Mary shared one of her most valued possessions with the man that literally saved her life. How do you put a price on that?

Indeed. Mary, perhaps more than most, knew exactly what Jesus did for her personally. She was there when Jesus made all the men who wanted to kill her go away. She was there when Jesus told her sister to mind her own business.

Maybe for us it is not so obvious on how Jesus works in our lives. Maybe we don't sense any kind of nearness or closeness with Jesus. Maybe for us Jesus is this guy we wave at periodically but don't see much use for him otherwise.

But have we taken the time to honestly reflect on who Jesus is and what he has done for us? It is all too easy to take Jesus and his teachings for granted. The fact is that many of Jesus' ideas are so baked into our laws and ways of thinking that we forget that so many of the attitudes we have — ideas about justice, equality, how the poor should be treated. These are rooted in Jesus. His influence on our lives cannot be underestimated. Even so-called secular nations that downplay the role of church and religion espouse policies that affirm the dignity of people and ensure a minimum standard of living to all people. In short, Jesus' example and influence on our lives is far more pervasive than we may admit. In 2022, we certainly fall way short of what Jesus expects of the world. On the other hand, we at least have incorporated many of his ideas into our laws.

What I'm saying is that Jesus has transformed humanity for the better. Every advance in human rights that has occurred over the centuries has been rooted in the teachings of Jesus. While we have a long way to go, none of us, at least in this room, would ever go back to the way things were.

So if we really believe that Jesus has made the world a better place, why shouldn't be extravagant toward him? Why should we not recognize that Jesus means much, much more to us than we can realize and that giving in his name truly has no price. Indeed, it is worth everything, just as Mary understood.

Today we gather around this table to join Jesus for the supper, the banquet, he gave for us. In the bread and the cup, the body and the blood, let us appreciate once again the sacrifice he made so we can glimpse what humanity can and should be. Let us remember how Mary did all she could to honor Jesus in both what he did for her and what he was about to do for all of us.

No wonder Jesus told the crowd to leave her alone! She knew exactly what she was doing.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.