

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

ROCHEPORT BLUEGRASS SABBATH

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The Scripture

John 12:1-8

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."

The Message

The Smell

Nick Larson

The smell of chlorine wafts through the air. Suddenly, you recall childhood memories of summers spent in a swimming pool you haven't seen in years. Or perhaps it's a whiff of apple pie, or the scent of the perfume your grandmother wore, or maybe incense from an old church, and memories come flooding in.

For me, the sepia splendor shines through the haze with the heavy scent of vinegar rising from rainbow cups. With that smell, I'm instantly transported back to the kitchen tables of my childhood, often the night before Easter, as we kids gathered around with my mom or grandmother. We would dip eggs into those rainbow-colored cups. The smell brings back the mystery and wonder of Easter's past. I'm seven-years-old again and running around barefoot in the grass (as a kid I hated to wear shoes) in my Sunday best, clutching a bag or basket as I pluck violet eggs from tufts of still-brown grass. Seeking the new among the old, beside myself with excitement.

Scientists say that while words go to the thinking part of the brain, smells-fragrances – go to the emotional part, the amygdala. That's why a whiff of Grandma's perfume brings Grandma herself back for a brief moment, and for some, why a bit of incense is the smell of the divine. I have an old, scented cranberry candle sitting above my

computer in my office that I used to use in that first youth group's communion services. It still makes my mouth water for warm bread dipped in grape juice.

I think that's part of what Mary is doing for us in this story. She's honoring Jesus' utter humanity, even as she worships his divinity. She, one of his oldest friends, recognizes that in his living, Jesus was as "grounded" as the rest of us. That this extremely holy man, this friend of hers, who not too long ago raised her very dead brother from the grave, sees him as the one who commands all of this and all of us. Somehow his humanity, his connection, his feet are what makes all of us somehow holy, too.

I wonder if she was kneeling in the mystery where we often first see death, too, in the feet and hands when life leaves us. Ancient Jewish customs were to anoint the deceased body of loved ones starting first with the hands and the feet.

Still, I am captured by the powerful symbolism of Mary anointing the feet of Jesus. I'm remember, for instance, the command to Moses to take off his shoes for his feet were standing on holy ground. And I find myself deeply aware that many of us, our feet ground us – they are where we first physically meet this world God has made. And I wonder, I do, whether the act of taking off one's shoes is not only a sign of respect, but a way in which we come closer to "the Holy" itself.

I do wonder what it would look like if we all approached the places where life meets death with a deep sense of wonder. I wonder if we could, if we would, only hold one another's hands, if this might bring a deeper greater gentleness to our life together. Indeed, what amazing gifts might be ours if we could kneel and honor the humanity in another? I imagine that we might be reminded of the holy there, as well.

Mary's anointing Jesus for his burial, and while her behavior may have seemed strange to those standing around, was no more strange than that of the prophets who went before her – Ezekiel eating the scroll of the Lord as a sign that he carried the word of God around inside of him (Ezekiel 2), or Jeremiah smashing the clay jar to show God's judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 19), or Isaiah walking around naked and barefoot as an oracle against the nations (Isaiah 20). Prophets do things like that. They act out. They act out the truth that no one else can see, and those standing around either write them off as nuts or fall silent before the disturbing news they bring from God.

When Mary stood before Jesus with that pound of pure nard in her hand, it could have gone either way. She could have anointed his head, and everyone would have proclaimed him as a king. But she did not do that. When she moved toward him, she dropped to her knees and poured the perfume on his feet, which means that she knew he was a man destined for death. "Leave her alone," Jesus said to those who would have prevented her. Let her finish delivering this prophetic message. So, Mary rubbed

his feet with perfume so precious that its sale might have fed a poor family for a year, and act so lavish that it suggests another layer to her prophecy. There is nothing economical about this man's death, just as there has been nothing economical about his life. In him, the extravagance of God's love is made flesh. In him, the excessiveness of God's mercy is made manifest. (Barbara Brown Taylor)

Some days loom large in memory, and some smells trigger larger than life memories that take us back to those moments. Jesus says that Mary's prophetic act will be one of those we remember.

I was never a big fan of church in my childhood, but Easter holds a pleasant association for me. We went into Chicago with my maternal grandmother. I remember us and her decked out in white and golden finery. I remember the thundering music, sitting next to my three siblings. I remember the smell of my grandmother's perfume; the special one she wore only on special occasions. I remember how she would give me some jelly beans on Easter, and I would sit in church and sneak them from my pocket into my hand and then raising my hands to my face in a posture of prayer. I would slip the jelly bean into my mouth and suck it down to a soft lump.

A deep gladness and lightness of heart accompanied the days. The winter concluded, the slush melted, the salt-rimmed streets scoured clean by the spring rains, the daffodils blossomed, the hours of sunlight stretched both ends of the day. When the preacher would read from the book of Revelation, how Christ made all things new, nature nodded its agreement.

Easter would not work as well in any other season but spring. For we all know, Jesus could have resurrected in October, but it was a stroke of genius to celebrate his revival in spring, when renewal is more believable.

Every Easter, churches bring out a host of special things, big celebrations, bell choirs, brass, your best suit coat. For me as a kid, and for my own kids, I bet they look at Easter with mixed emotions. It is more church, more crunchy shirts, sitting through it all morning seems a little cruel. Yet though they would likely deny it, as I would have at their age, I think they delight in Easter. We Disciples don't believe that any one day is more holy than another, but we leave the door open, and if a little extra glitz and glamour slip in on Easter, that's usually okay with us.

Yet, not everyone welcomes all the hoopla. Sometimes when you speak to a group of pastors about their favorite Sundays, and they feel safe enough to be honest, most don't list Easter. They likely complain about all the noisy people, ambitious music sung by overreaching soloists, funny hats, general chaos, and trying to remember the names of once-a-year visitors. As a fan of occasional mayhem, I enjoy Easter for a lot of those very reasons. For fifty-one weeks a year, we're going about our business in a

dignified way, so if folks want to hoot and holler and wail and kick up their heels one Sunday a year, that's fine with me.

I know pastors who expend so much effort on their Easter sermons, thirty-hours or more. Yet, I think some time ago, it dawned on me that one could really stand up on Easter in the pulpit and read from the Betty Crocker cookbook, and people would still clap and say, "Good sermon pastor." So maybe this year, I'll just put on my suit, weave together a string of clichés, and we can crank up the volume on the organ and sing "Christ the Lord Has Risen Today," and everyone will go home happy and glad to be alive.

But that's not what this is all about is it? When you think back to that smell of vinegar at my grandmother's kitchen table, I don't think about all of that. I think about how she offered all she had to us, her grandchildren, just as Mary offered all she had to her friend and savior, Jesus. Easter, without the eyes of a kid, is like Christmas without a tree. So here Mary offers her lavish gift, her extravagant gift, her excessive gift, and Jesus says bring on the gold and white of Easter, that even as I am being anointed for burial there is a hint of that life to come, as Lazarus, the man Jesus brought back from the dead, watches as his sister is seeking to serve Christ, looking for new life among the living who will be dead, and offering it anyways.

The bottle is not to be held back and kept and admired. This precious substance will not be saved. It will be opened, offered and used, at great price. It will be raised up and poured out for the life of the world, emptied to the last drop. Before that happens, Jesus will gather his friends together one last time. At another banquet, around another supper table, with most of the same people present, Jesus will strip, tie a towel around his waist and wash his disciples' feet. Then he will give them a new commandment: Love another, as I have loved you. As Mary loved Jesus.