



## There's Something About Mary

Fifth Sunday in Lent  
13 March 2016

Ascension Lutheran Church  
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Let us pray...Lord Jesus, we give thanks that, in the midst of so much ill-feeling and misunderstanding, there were people at Bethany who welcomed you. And we give thanks that, down the ages, there have been those who, in their homes, have offered havens of welcome and understanding in the midst of strife. We give thanks for those who have opened their homes to us when we needed somewhere to find refuge. May our hearts, our homes, and our churches be like that home in Bethany: places of understanding for the misunderstood, places of peace for the hunted, places of healing for the suffering. Lord Jesus, make yourself at home in us. We know that you will take us as you find us –so just come in. Amen.

The gates of Jerusalem are not so very far away. For Jesus, it will be a journey of less than two miles that will separate this place of sanctuary from the place of his death. We already know the major players in this story today. Martha, Lady of the house and the Martha Stewart of her day; Lazarus, newly raised – fresh from the grave; Jesus, Savior of the world; Judas, the one who will betray; and Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus – provider of perfume – devoted disciple of Jesus. Mary – There's something about Mary.

All four Gospels tell the story. The guest list varies very little. The location differs between the home of Simon the Leper and the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The characters differ only in the name or absence of said name. In John, we are told the woman who anoints Jesus is Mary. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the woman has no name. In Luke and John, the woman anoints the feet of Jesus – a sign of preparing Jesus for his burial. In Matthew and Mark – the woman anoints not the feet of Jesus but his head – a sign of preparing Jesus for his accession to the throne of his kingdom. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record an alabaster flask. Mark and John are the only ones to name the expensive ointment perfume as pure nard.

Nard comes from the spikenard plant native to India's eastern Himalayas, growing from 10,000 to 16,000 feet elevation. The roots are crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic, amber-colored essential oil that was a favorite perfume in antiquity. The best spikenard was imported from India in sealed alabaster containers. It was very expensive because of the tedious extraction process as well as the cost of importing it along extensive caravan routes leading west to the Mediterranean. In verse 5, Judas calculates its value as 300 denarii, which, at the wage of about a denarius per day, was nearly one year's wages -- a very expensive perfume indeed! This perfume could be worth \$30,000 to \$50,000 in today's dollars.

And that fact alone, should be enough to shock us into the recognition that the extravagance of this moment between Mary and Jesus is for all intensive purposes an act of intimacy we should perhaps avert our eyes from until Mary finishes her act of worship. Not unlike the amount of money you give to God in your offering envelope or the quality of the prayer you pray to God when you do not know a great moment of need – this moment between Mary and Jesus is the act of the “created” worshipping the “Creator.” And we will miss the significance if we turn away from the scene unfolding.

“For the disciples, the ministry was fast becoming a business to be budgeted rather than a Savior to be served,” writes author Ken Gire. “What a stab this must have been to their honored guest. Bickering about the poor when one sits in their midst famished for a crust of human understanding. They are the most intimate confidants, yet none has a clue to the gnawing hunger inside Jesus. Peter doesn't. James doesn't. John doesn't. But Mary, she does.” There's something about Mary. Remember the story from Luke 10... <sup>38</sup> Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. <sup>39</sup> She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. <sup>40</sup> But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked,

“Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me.” <sup>41</sup> But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; <sup>42</sup> there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her. Here, today, Mary has chosen the better part once again. She breaks the jar of nard over the feet of Jesus and wipes his feet with her hair. The Bible says – the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment...a fragrant reminder of the extravagance of love and worship offered to the Savior of the world.

We are in our third week of our First Communion Stepping Stone. 31 students and their parents are learning of God’s extravagant love for them through the tangible gift of bread and wine at the altar of God. We have spent time building relationships. We have heard the story of God’s call to Moses through the burning bush and the journey of Moses back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. We have counted plagues – do you remember them – water to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, death of first born. We have learned about the lamb’s blood placed on the doorposts and lintel and how the angel of death would pass over the doors of the Hebrew slaves. We remembered the parting of the red sea and the institution of Passover to remind God’s people of God’s action to deliver them from slavery. We retold the story of Jesus gathering with his disciples for Passover and the institution of the Last Supper. This morning – our students will hear once again the command of Jesus from Luke 19, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” All of this – God’s gift to us. All of this - reminding us that God is at work – creating, loving, inviting, sacrificing, forgiving, dying, rising, redeeming, promising. All of this is God’s doing.

AS FOR US...Romans 11 might be our best hope. **33** Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out. **34** Is there anyone around who can explain God? Anyone smart enough to tell [God] what to do? **35** Anyone who has done [God] such a huge favor that God has to ask [their] advice? **36** Everything comes from [God]; Everything happens through [God]; Everything ends up in [God]. Always glory! Always praise! Yes. Yes. Yes.

Except. There’s something about Mary. Inasmuch as John tells us the story this day – Mary falls before Jesus with no agenda. She comes only to worship. Our intentions are hardly ever so pure. We have needs and wants and demands of our God. There are people to heal. There are bills to pay. There are lives to save. There are sufferings to ease. There are tears to wipe away. Yes. Yes. Yes. I believe God will listen and answer. Not a single prayer lifted to God goes unnoticed.

And yet – today – in this moment at the feet of Jesus – God notices something else...in Mary, God notices the gift of a heart broken open pouring out love – washing feet in worship – whispering a simple “thank you” for all that has been done and all that will be done. And in this most intimate moment between created and Creator – Mary has set her whole self aside – emptied herself completely – to become a living sanctuary for her Savior. Perhaps we have time to remember. To be reminded to set ourselves aside this day. Do you know the song?

Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true.  
With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living, sanctuary, for you.

Sisters and brothers – God is at work in our world; in our church; in each of us. Yes – there’s something about Mary this day. But the good news is that there’s something about each of us, as well, and God takes notice of us again, and again, and again. Thanks be to God. Amen.