

Sermon for Sunday, March 13, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

[headscarf on]

I will never forget the smell of that perfume.

It was a cool evening, just last week. Passover was coming;
all the roads were choked with people
heading up to Jerusalem.

Passover is always busy, but this was different.

Usually

you can hear the pilgrims
singing the traditional psalms of ascent
as they trudge up the dusty roads.

But this time

the singing sounded

kind of muffled;

and when I looked out

the faces seemed

more strained,

or perhaps it was the effect

of the Roman soldiers

stationed visibly along the main routes,

daring anyone

to do something

unexpected.

Maybe it

as just my imagination, but there seemed to be something in
the air, a kind of stifling feeling...

And the rumors!

You never know quite what to believe,

but I'd been hearing

that some people thought

that our friend, Jesus,

was planning to lead

an uprising against the Romans.

They were saying

that he wanted to be King!

I wouldn't have minded it,
but, you know,
it really didn't seem to be his style.
I can't imagine him
at the head of an army, then or now, and as for killing
people...
it just doesn't make sense.

And then there were other people
who thought that his popularity
was all a myth.
That the leaders at the temple
were right in being suspicious.
That no one really trusted him.
That it was all for show,
his supposed miracles,
and the crowds he attracted
were a danger
to the rest of us.
Because none of us wanted
the Romans to get ideas
that there might be some sort of threat.
And some people were even suggesting
that one of his close friends
was part of the plot.
Though that made no sense to me.
After all, we were all friends,
and I can't imagine any of us
being a betrayer.

Jesus was a good friend to us.
Every time
he came down south
he would come by for a visit.
And when we needed him most
he was there.
Even if he did take his time about coming.
You remember, it wasn't that long ago,
the time when Lazarus got really sick.
And no matter what we did for him,

he just got worse and worse.
So we sent ta message to Jesus.
We needed him.
He's the sort of person
you would want to have round
when there's a crisis,
and we have no other family,
just Mary and me, and Lazarus.
And we thought that maybe, maybe
those other stories were true,
and he might even be able to heal my brother.
But at the very least,
he would know what to do.

But he took a long time getting here.
We were waiting and waiting and waiting,
and Lazarus got sicker and sicker and sicker.
And by the time he arrived,
Lazarus had died.

I figured
that Jesus must be a charlatan.
All those healings had been put up jobs
and when the crunch came,
he couldn't face up
to his friends.
Couldn't cope with failure.
Just one of us really -
no one special after all.

So when he eventually turned up,
I didn't really know what to do.
Somewhere
in the back of my mind I hoped that maybe,
somehow,
he might be able to do something.
That maybe death
wasn't the end after all. Just maybe...

And then he asked us to open up the tomb.

Well!
You can imagine what I had to say about that!
Four days dead and buried, in this climate? I ask you!
Well, I told him so!
Lord," I said, "Lord, don't you know that it will stink?"
And the stench of death is not pleasant, I'm telling you.

But next think you know, the stone was rolled back,
and Lazarus was walking out,
grave clothes flapping.
I couldn't quite believe it.
My brother was dead,
and Jesus brought him back to life again.
And here he is,
still living with us.

But speaking of the stench of death, that reminds me
of what I started to say.
The smell of that perfume.

After Lazarus woke up,
there were rumors
that the leaders were after Jesus
so he headed out into the desert.
And it wasn't until
the week before Passover
that he came back,
and stopped over with us.
We're not far from the city;
it's much easier to find accommodation out here
than to compete with the crowds down there.
We organized a special meal for him;
we hadn't had time to thank him properly
after Lazarus was raised,
and he rushed off into the desert,
so we invited his followers
and a few of our friends,
and of course Lazarus and Mary
and me,
and we cooked up

a special meal.

Of course I got tied up in the kitchen, as usual;
Mary never seems to be around
when work needs to be done,
and suddenly
I smelled
the most beautiful smell,
like perfume.
But not just a little,
not like when you dab it on
before you go out
somewhere special.
This was strong,
stronger even
than the smell of the left over dinner.
It spread right through the house.
It was beautiful...

Well, of course,
I went to see what it was.
And was Mary, my sister,
kneeling on the floor
in front of Jesus.
It seems that she had taken a whole container
of the most expensive perfume,
and smeared it all
over Jesus' feet.
And then she let down her hair,
and used it to wipe
his feet dry.

I was so embarrassed.
Making a spectacle of herself in front of all those guests. Though you know, she does
tend to be
a bit excitable, you know,
lets her emotions show
a bit more than I would.
And the extravagance!
Judas took the words

right out of my mouth.
A year's pay
for your average worker.
think how many people
it could have fed!
That's what Judas said,
and he was right,
though we weren't to know
that he wasn't really motivated by compassion,
but had his hand in the till.
He was out for what he could get.
And what he got, was thirty pieces of silver,
and our friend and Lord
dead.
The beautiful scent of perfume had become
the stench of death.

You know, sometimes I wish
that I'd done what Mary did.
She showed her love for Jesus in a way that left no doubts,
no regrets.
Pouring that perfume on his feet at least went some way
towards showing how much she loved him,
how much we all loved him.

But I...well I loved him too,
and I tried to show it
with making him his favorite meals
and keeping the spare room ready for him
to stay at a moment's notice. But no one ever notices.
It's just what I do.
I wish there had been a way
to show Jesus
how much I loved him.

And when he died, at least Mary had the memory
of that perfume, and the feel of her hair
against his feet.
And that, although she didn't plan it that way,
somehow she was a part

of the preparation for his death.
While we stood helpless,
watching from a safe distance
as he died.
At least she knew that she had done something.
While we left it too late.

He was right you know.
We will always have the poor with us.
Poverty is something that you just can't eradicate.
There's always more to do,
always more people to help,
as long as we live
in this messy, broken, sinful world of ours.
But he only lived such a short time, and then he died.
And now he's buried
in the tomb.
I was too late to show my love,
too late to let him know...too late...

[headscarf off]

That is, of course, only my reconstruction of what happened.
We'll never really know for sure what Martha thought and felt,
especially in those days of waiting
between Jesus' death and his resurrection.

Jesus, whose birth was marked with death
in the wise men's gift of myrrh, used in burial,
is in today's gospel
again anointed for death.
It is a foreshadowing of the death
that will come so soon afterward,
a foreshadowing of the embalming of his body
described in John 20.
By the action of Mary,
by the attention
drawn to the traitor Judas,
this man is marked for death.

And so this perfume is a sign
of both the extravagance of love,
and the pain of death.

Love is costly.
A year's wages
was what the perfume was worth.
And it was worth it,
for Mary, it was worth it.
Giving freely, even extravagantly,
to show her love.

And it makes me wonder.
What are we willing to give
to show Christ our love?

And then, what begins as an act of love for Jesus,
takes Mary and Martha, and us as well
beyond the dim warmth of the dining room
to the desolation of the cross.
The cost cannot be confined to the material.
What begins as a deep expression of our love for Christ
may lead us on into the unknown.
As we begin to share in the pilgrimage,
the journey of Christ,
we begin also to share in his death.
We begin to share his pain over a broken world,
and to share through him
in the suffering of the world.
That is the way
of the cross.

Yet that cross is not just
a symbol of death.
Like the perfume in reverse,
it has a deeper, more elusive meaning.

Just as that Passover
was no ordinary Passover,
Christ's death

was no ordinary death.
The first Passover was about God's great salvation
of the people of Israel from Egypt.
That Passover marked by the cross
was about God's great salvation of humanity
from the burden of sin and grief and pain.
It offers us life and forgiveness,
healing and restoration and joy.

And perhaps it was Mary whom the apostle Paul
was thinking of
when he wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians,
“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through
us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the
aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are
perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to
life.”

It's not too late, not too late at all
for us to show Christ
the depth of our love,
not too late
to join him on his journey
into the stench
of death,
not too late to ourselves become
the fragrance
that is the aroma of Christ,
the fragrance of life.