

The Fragrance of Resurrection
a sermon preached by
the Reverend Michael J. Connelly
Order of Community Chaplains
at St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts
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My friend Mary spent last summer dying of cancer. It was a long, slow, painful battle, and at the end, when the doctors and the hospice workers couldn't do much more than keep her barely comfortable, Mary asked her family to take her home so that she could die in her own bed. In her moments of consciousness, Mary was determined to plan the details of her funeral service with her family. She chose the hymns, selected the scripture readings, even picked out the dress she would wear into eternity. She also insisted on one very unusual request. "No flowers at my funeral!" she told her family. "I don't want any flowers at the funeral home, and I sure don't want any flowers going down in the hole with me," she said. "What a waste. If anybody wants to send me flowers, they can do it right now, while they will still do me some good. If there's going to be any flowers, I want to be able to see them and smell them." And by the end of the day, the flowers started to arrive. Big bouquets of roses and tiger lilies and carnations. Arrangements of tulips and lilacs and chrysanthemums. Pots of marigolds, her favorite. By the next day, Mary's room was a sea of color and fragrance. And all those flowers became a true sacrament ... an outward and visible sign... of the love she had shared with so many of her friends and relatives. She died one sunny afternoon last September, pain-free, at peace, in her own room, in her own bed, enfolded in flowers, inhaling their perfume, and blessed by the true love that it all meant.

I think that something of Mary's story is also going on in Jesus's life, as we just heard in the Gospel of John. Here, John shows us a very vulnerable, very human side to Jesus. It's a Saturday night. It's a party. Four old friends... Mary and Martha and Lazarus and Jesus. Maybe it's even a "welcome back from the tomb" party for Lazarus, since John tells us that only a few days earlier, Jesus had raised his friend from the dead back into life. Mary is probably sitting starry-eyed as usual, close to Jesus, hanging on his every gesture, his every word. Martha is probably being Martha, pouring the wine and tending to the slabs of fish and chunks of lamb on the grill. Lazarus is still perhaps a bit ... fusty ... from his time in the tomb, and maybe he's still not sure exactly what happened to him or how, but he's got to be grateful for his second chance at life.

And Jesus? Jesus must have a lot on His mind this night. Jesus knows that the Scribes and the Pharisees, to say nothing of the Romans, have already heard all about the miracle he worked for his friend Lazarus. Jesus knows that because of this miracle, He is now under the close scrutiny of His enemies, and they are determined to get rid of Him. Jesus knows that in a just few short hours, on Sunday morning, He will climb up on a donkey and ride into Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. The people of Israel will wave palm branches at Him and acclaim Him as the Son of David, and therefore, as their new King. Jesus knows that to claim to be any kind of King in Caesar's Roman province of Judaea is just as good as committing suicide. Jesus knows that because of the coming triumph of Palm Sunday, the Romans will intend to exact brutal retribution against Himself and His followers and His whole community. Jesus knows that only by surrendering Himself personally to the Romans will He be able to spare the lives of His friends. Jesus knows, therefore, that by this time next week, He will most likely be dead.

It's ironic, isn't it? Here is Jesus sitting next to Lazarus, eating good food and drinking good wine. This time last week, Lazarus was dead, but he is now enjoying his second chance at life. And by this time next week, Jesus Himself will be lying dead in a tomb as dark and cold as the one that held Lazarus. "What agonies I will have to suffer before new life comes out of my tomb?" Jesus might well be thinking to Himself. "What have I gotten myself into? Why am I even doing this at all?" As the words of the medieval chant go, "In the midst of life, we are in death." Or are we?

Maybe Mary sees a shadow of sadness in Jesus' eyes as He ponders his imminent sufferings and death. Mary gets up and brings back a white alabaster jar, full of the fragrant perfume of nard. Originally found in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains in India and Tibet, nard was the most precious ointment in the ancient world. Mary holds a full pound of it, worth 300 denarii, we are told. Now in the first century, a denarius was a day's pay for a common laborer; it's not too hard to do the math. The ointment Mary is holding costs about \$1000 an ounce. And she pours out the whole jar, as if it were as cheap as water, every last drop, anointing Jesus's feet, and according to Mark and Matthew, his head as well.

Scholars say that nard is a thick, amber-colored oil; its scent is deep and rich, spicy and exotic, not unlike the earthy smell of humus and soil freshly turned in springtime. Nard is mentioned twice in the Old Testament love poem, the *Song of Songs*, as a symbol of the intimate passion that two lovers share. Nard was

also often used to prepare bodies for burial, to mask the odor of decomposition. In Mark's gospel, Jesus Himself even says that Mary has poured out the perfume to prepare him for his burial. But the precious ointment that was meant for Jesus' death is instead poured out extravagantly for His delight and comfort while he is yet alive. Mary then kneels like a slave at Jesus' feet and lovingly wipes his feet dry with her hair. In a society where women rarely appeared in public without their hair covered with a veil, what Mary does is an astonishingly intimate act of total service, surrender, and devotion to Jesus. As the perfume's strong fragrance wafts throughout the whole house, time seems to stop. There is no tomorrow or yesterday, only a profound *now*. Instead of ministering, Jesus is ministered to; instead of healing, He is healed. Mary's love becomes a mirror in which Jesus sees reflected His own love, God's love, for the whole world. And Jesus says to the jealous and griping apostles, "Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing for me."

Now we all know that the word "Christ" comes from the Greek word *Christos* which means "the Anointed One." Likewise, the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, or "Messiah" has exactly the same meaning: "the Anointed One." By anointing Jesus head to toe with the perfumed oil, Mary makes a sublime act of faith in her Lord. Every drop of oil dripping from the jar declares Mary's faith that this man whom she loves so dearly is indeed the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God, the King of all.

But what's more important is that Mary is right here and right now foretelling the reality of the Resurrection. With every drop of the fragrance she wipes up with her hair, she prophesies that Jesus will never need the sweetness of this nard to conceal the bitterness of death; his body will never decay; he will not remain in his tomb. Instead, He *will* rise ... and He *will* live again. Her alabaster jar is as empty as the tomb of Jesus will be on Easter morning.

Like the flowers that surrounded my friend Mary on the day she died, the nard poured out by Mary of Bethany becomes a sacrament -- an outward and visible sign-- that against the power of the Resurrection, death has no meaning. Death is never victorious. Every tiny crocus that finally pushes itself up through the still icy grass proves that death is never the last word. Life will always be stronger than death. Love will always be stronger than even life itself. And the passionate love that God has for each and every one of us is the strongest, most powerful force in the universe.

Jesus played out that overwhelming divine love when He willingly took on the sufferings and death that awaited him. He poured out His life for us, and

through the power of His resurrection, He gives a second chance at life-- a share in that resurrection-- to all who trust in Him. All we have to do is open our hearts to Him in faith. This is what Paul is saying in his letter to the church at Phillipi. Christ's resurrection changes all the rules. It doesn't matter what our fame or achievements might be. It doesn't matter how many good deeds we do. It doesn't matter how often we go to church. It doesn't matter how obediently we follow the laws. It doesn't matter if we sell all our precious ointments and give the money to the poor, even if it amounts to 300 denarii. Paul says that there is nothing we can do in order to earn God's love, and there is nothing we could ever do to make us lose God's love. It's all Grace. And Grace is forever. In the end, the only thing that matters is this: are we in love with God? Are we brave enough to believe that God is madly in love with us? Can we wipe the dust from the mirrors of our souls enough to let a reflection of God's grace shine out in our own lives?

Wiping the dust from the mirror of our soul. Spring cleaning for the heart ... isn't that what Lent is really supposed to be all about? Sweeping away the cobwebs of our secret sins, cleaning out the clutter of our old angers and resentments and selfishness. Opening up the windows of our souls to let in God's sweet, fresh, cleansing air. After days and days of monsoon rains, the sun finally came out and the temperature hit almost 70 degrees last Thursday. I threw open all the windows of my house. My granddaughter brought in a little pot of crocuses to put on the windowsill. The springtime air was rich with the musky nard scent of thawing earth, new life, rebirth, yes, resurrection. I closed my eyes. I felt the warm sun on my face. And I gave thanks to God.

As we prepare in the days to come to walk in the shadow of the cross, may the God of new life, the God of second chances, bless us and keep us all in the promise of the resurrection.

Amen.