

**Scripture:** Mark 14: 1-9

### **The Plot to Kill Jesus**

**14** It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; <sup>2</sup> for they said, “Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.”

### **The Anointing at Bethany**

<sup>3</sup> While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. <sup>4</sup> But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? <sup>5</sup> For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. <sup>6</sup> But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. <sup>7</sup> For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. <sup>9</sup> Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

## **Preparing for Death**

**Mark 14:1-9**

**March 21, 2021**

**Kerra Becker English**

There's a New Yorker cartoon that shows an elderly man with a walker standing next to his son in front of a large storage unit that is crammed in every available space with stuff. The caption reads, "One day Son, all this will be yours." Some things are just funny, but not funny, right?

Younger generations seem to be getting more and more minimalist in their tastes. I think I understand why – given that in the last decade my parents built an additional 2 car garage with a full second floor for storage space on their property. I feel for the son in this cartoon. Stuff has piled up. The accumulated belongings of living for 45 years in the same space is overwhelming to this daughter who has her own house full of more than what she really needs.

My answer to all that - - - Swedish death cleaning. I was a little too excited when I learned about this tradition. It turns out that in Sweden, when you reach a certain age, it becomes time to start letting go of possessions. Kind of like Marie Kondo's art of tidying – but different. It's a shedding of stuff that one does intentionally before departing this world. Not quite as morbid as it sounds – it gives the giver an opportunity to bequeath special gifts to those who need it, or would be touched by receiving whatever it happens to be. Rather than simply letting go of the things that don't "spark joy" it's about sharing the joy of giving while you still have the opportunity to see the smile or the blessing you can impart with such sharing of your belongings. It's also kind of like the "buy-nothing" Facebook page in my neighborhood. On that page, one can post either a gift or a wish. You can give away something that might benefit another person

who could use it, or wish for something that someone might have and easily be ready to part with. This process itself now has a name – it's called Free-cycling.

I share these stories about “stuff” because we are a stuff-loving kind of culture. Our culture has had consumerism in the driver's seat for so long that it seems like a certain few billionaires still believe the catch phrase from the greed-driven 1980's that *the one who dies with the most toys wins*. There seems to be this ever-present contest at the top for who gets the title of richest person in the world. I could be wrong here, but I find this obsession with accumulation to be one of the many ways we choose to creatively avoid the subject of our own mortality. If I accumulate more than I really need for me and my family and am just cautious enough to avoid all the things that might kill me – then perhaps I might just live forever.

Strangely enough I sense some biblical parallels in the argument that ensues over the use of the “costly perfume” that is used to anoint Jesus. Surely it could have been used more wisely, saved for those who REALLY need it, rather than wasted on this display of extravagance with Jesus. For me, it evokes the Swedish death cleaning principle – that giving away generously and extravagantly is a loving way to prepare for death, this time for Jesus' death.

But in Mark's telling of this story, he simply says, some were there who said to one another IN ANGER – “Why was the ointment wasted in this way?” As the oldest of the gospels – this seems to be the clearest message of all. Why such generosity? Why such extravagance? Why wouldn't you put that ointment away in the back of the storage shed for another day? Jesus knew they weren't as concerned about the poor as they were letting on. They just didn't want HER making a scene that carried with it the scent of loss, the fragrance of mortality.

This story also reminds me of all the posturing and fussing about money that happened at the last Presbytery meeting. We do this kind of jockeying around budgets and how we prioritize spending frequently – especially when we are afraid – especially when death is in the room. At the February Presbytery meeting, we began with Zoom worship where the pastor from Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond announced that he wished we could have been there in person to see what they had done with their \$5 million sanctuary renovation. Then, later in that very same worship service we told the stories of two churches that closed because they couldn't keep paying the bills during a pandemic. I could feel the contrast – though it didn't occur to me what I was feeling until later on. When it came time for the budget part of the meeting – that same sinking feeling persisted – there were complaints, you could call it ANGER, about potentially spending out of the Presbytery endowment at too great a rate to try to meet the mission and vision lifted up by the Strategic Planning Committee who has been scrambling to make sense of not only a Presbytery level transition, but a national reckoning. To answer the arguments of why aren't we saving this money to sustain and preserve our precious institution, it was explained that the endowment grew by something crazy like 20% in the past year, and the spending was mostly projected to be spent out of that growth - and by the way, the Presbytery has \$5.7 million in the bank. Why would you waste that money? Doing mission and ministry? We might die if we don't hang on to it?

Pssst. Let me tell you a secret. We are already dying in many places. How are we going to prepare for living as some things we have known and loved are passing away?

Can you believe we still get angry over this? We fight over wills and endowments. We pursue arguments that have nothing to do with helping the poor or actually following Jesus, and say, “Why was the perfume wasted?”

We have to change the way most of us have been taught to see things in order to get the point of this story. The store it up, save it up, hold on tight mentality has to give way to something different. And that difference might be in seeing what was going on in the first verses of this passage where Mark is explicitly identifying that Jesus is being hunted. Literally stalked and HUNTED by those who were teaching and leading in his Father's house.

The chief priests and scribes were PLANNING to kidnap Jesus and have him killed. The only thing stopping them was their fear of rioting and retaliation. This is no longer literary foreshadowing. This is getting real. Jesus does not now, nor has he ever, shied away from talking about his death, from preparing, and preparing, and preparing his disciples for the inevitable truth – that his way of being in the world is going to get him killed. No, this is explicit. He is being HUNTED down. It's no longer a matter of if, but of when. The loving response to that truth comes from this anonymous woman who meets Jesus in the anxiety he carries about his own death and then anoints him in this moment with expensive ointment reserved for burying important people. She fills the room with that smell that aroused emotion, emotion the others might not have even known they had. The rest of those who were gathered are agitated, angry, furious that she would do this. But Jesus respects her – and commends her. What she has done will be told in remembrance of her. That's true. We tell this story, HER story. And it is therefore important to seek understanding for why Jesus wants us to remember her – in particular – as often as this story gets told.

I do think it's because she gave his death meaning – rather than denying that it could possibly be what was about to happen. She is the Black mother who has to give her sons “the talk” about not giving the police any reason to suspect anything wrong. She is the nurse who holds the iPad for the COVID patient to see their family in the ICU. She is the friend who listens when the CT scan

determines cancer – and it’s the bad kind. She is the refugee who smuggles her children across the border dreaming of a better life. She refuses to let death be an anonymous statistic. She is the one who prays the names of the Asian women gunned down in Atlanta. She believes with all her heart that the 541,000 COVID dead in the United States, the 2,700,000 COVID dead worldwide are human beings that were loved - who deserve to be anointed and remembered rather than merely “counted.” What she has done will be told in remembrance of her. Though John’s gospel will tell you that this woman was Mary Magdalene, I kind of like thinking of her as possibly any of these women, as all of these women. While others in the room would argue in anger, she wastes no time, spares no extravagance in giving love. May we tell her story. May we live her story. Amen.