

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
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Isaiah 43:16-21
Philippians 3:4b-14
John 12:1-8

MINISTRY OF THE ALABASTER JAR

You and I are recipients of a great gift—the gift of God allowing us to trust, helping us to believe. You and I were also given the opportunity to share a unique connection with God. We are each looking for ways to express that bond between God and humanity. We're even drawn to people who are adept at demonstrating the connection that makes all of life different. At times, like this Sunday possibly, we become mesmerized by the biblical portrayal that links us to God; a sovereign, loving God, that in spite of our contradictory history of being faithful, this God offers us absolute acceptance, unmerited favor.

The suggestion for us today is that at various points in our journeys of faith, we connect with Mary in this story. We are meant to experience what Mary encountered that day, the ability to simply be in God's presence and be at peace. Remember back when Al Pacino portrayed that Lieutenant Colonel who tragically lost his sight, Frank Slade? And in the process of going blind, he had worked to develop his other senses so as to not be so vulnerable. Even though he is blind, he is able to focus on one particular woman and is able to tell her the brand name of the soap she uses. She is flabbergasted and she says to him, "That's amazing." He retorts, "Well, I am in the amazing business." So much attitude from him.

Mary from Bethany has been changed by an amazing conviction that God really does love her; God cares for her even enough to die for her. I have a friend (I did his daughter's wedding last year) whose daughter, like many young people growing up, went to him and asked, "How will I know when I am really in love? How will I know when it's a real thing and not just another fancy?" His response was classic, it was simple. He said, "Imagine you are standing on the bow of a sinking ocean liner and you're holding in your hands the last life preserver or rescue ring. You look down and you see your betrothed flailing about in the ocean. Without hesitation, if you throw down that ring to him, you are in love."

Jesus knows and Mary knows what's going to happen because God has loved and healed, in part because of what God has done in Mary's own family. Mary is the brother of Lazarus. Lazarus has been raised from the dead and the news has spread everywhere. In fact, the news was so powerful that the religious leaders were frightened. So the priests and the Pharisees got together to try to calm the rumor and the momentum of what is happening in Jesus' life. If they don't stop what he's doing, there's going to be an unimaginable and unmanageable spread of devotion throughout the people to Christ's message and to his person.

Caiaphas—the high priest, the highest religious authority in the land—speaks up in Chapter 11, and he knows what they need to do; so they began one of the most famous

black ops procedures ever conceived. They planned to kill Jesus and therefore save themselves and the people. All because Jesus had befriended Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. All because they are who we are.

This whole faith business is messy stuff; you just can't seem to separate it from everyday life. Jesus, who is the embodiment of God's complete love for us—why do we oppose that? Why would there be a movement to squash that which satisfies the longing in each of us? But Mary knows what's happening behind the scenes and she must have searched her heart for a way to respond to such forgiveness. What could she offer? How could she comfort him?

Oh yes, she remembered her grandmother had given her an heirloom that had been passed down from her mother. Now I know John says she bought it, but “she bought it” was put in afterward to make that sentence make sense. Nowhere in Greek does it say she bought it; she had it. It had come across a desert on a camel, probably, from far away. It was the most precious thing that this family owned. It was the one thing that they needed to list on their inland insurance policy in case something happened. This is burial perfume; this is the most precious gift that you can give to someone else. This is the prized treasure of the Mary, Lazarus, and Martha family. Did you ever wonder why Mary hadn't used it on her brother Lazarus when he died? I wonder why she still had it; there'd already been a death in the family. Lazarus didn't merit the nard? Maybe it's a different Mary. No. This is the Mary who sat at Jesus' feet and heard that the one thing that will change life forever: that God has forgiven us, and the proof of that forgiveness is that we can experience healing to our brokenness, we can acknowledge our own gifts, our own sins, and we can respond by forgiving others.

Where in your life have you refused to say, at least to yourself, “I was wrong? I shouldn't have said that. If I could take those words back, I would.” Since scripture is about real life and real people, Mary shows us what it means today to be loved so completely that she might change how she responded the next time there was a tragedy. Mary has heard what we all long to hear. What Eliza Doolittle demanded in *My Fair Lady*: “Don't talk about love beaming above, if you're in love with me, show me.”

Mary has had the chance to become more than a second-class citizen, more than she had ever imagined that she could be in God's kingdom. She jumped at that chance, she takes the risk. Love without condition, one year of wages, the chance of a lifetime. The economy of this decision can't be lost in the mathematics. Mary knows that what she does she has to do. Mary has found out how much she is worth. How much are you worth? Would you let go of something more precious to you than anything else to express the worth that you feel as one of God's children? God's love and our response—that's our story. We say it every Sunday, but do we experience it? We know it and we can write it out on paper; we could fill out great statements of faith, but I believe that we respond in proportion to how much we believe we've been forgiven. I believe we are able to love one another in proportion to how much we believe it has cost God to love us. Amen.