

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year C

I feel the scornful eyes of others bearing down on the back of my head; I hear the rending of the conversation that occurs as she opens the door to the room. I intuitively sense the heart-felt pleas of my friends to halt this inappropriate intrusion, to escape the embarrassment of participating in the scandalous display of affection, which we all vaguely sense will occur.

I don't know what to do. I haven't known what to do for a while now. I don't even know what to make of my existence. The world seems strange to me. Since I've emerged from the tomb, I don't quite fit in, neither with the living nor the dead. I often wonder, if there is an in-between place I've entered into, where I see the world with eyes glued toward emerging newness, feel the world with a clarity and intensity of emotions previously unimaginable, and tend to my soul, oddly, not by being busy from morning to night, but by sitting in the presence of others.

But even I would never have expected this. Mary, boldly, yet gracefully, strides into the room, at this special dinner we're having for Jesus and his friends on their way to Jerusalem, Jesus, the one who we love as a brother, and yet who is so much more than our brother in heart.

She silently moves over to Jesus and kneels at his feet. I feel the instant and all-consuming closeness between Mary and Jesus. They appear to be in their own world but, strangely, we're also a part of it. I listen intently, wanting to hear and learn their distinct language of love, blushing a bit at the intimacy and privacy the act seems to demand. But it's right out here in front of us. Mary could have knelt at Jesus' feet at another time, but I instantly understand that there's something much larger going on here. We are being invited into something extraordinary.

I want to resist going into this peculiar place, which radiates holiness. Why do we do that? I want to turn my eyes away, to will my body to leave the room, and to shield myself from something I cannot understand or control. But I can't. The pull on my heart is strong and I fall completely into the depths of love. Love for Mary. Love for Jesus. Love for something so much bigger than I can explain.

Mary unties the ribbon of cloth, which releases her long, wavy, black curls, spilling around her shoulders and cascading down to her waist. She runs her hands over the nearly translucent alabaster jar she has brought with her, the one ready to spill forth the expensive nard, but first she draws the vessel to her heart. She closes her eyes, bows her head, and I think a blessing is happening.

Mary begins to pour the oil upon Jesus' feet, which she cradles in her delicate fingers. She pours the first drops and seems to hesitate slightly and we collectively breathe a sigh of relief. This unexpected yet remarkable thing will soon be over. But she persists, no longer drizzling the oil upon his feet, but allowing the oil to gush from the luminous alabaster jar. She smears the oil onto his feet with her hair, now saturated in the costly perfume, and anoints him as our king. As the explosive scent of the perfume releases and permeates every nook and cranny of our home, our hearts fill with dread, for this costly perfume she has poured upon Jesus is the spice for embalming, and we know our king, the one we hardly recognize, will shortly die. I know that before me is love gone beautifully wild.

My heart is racing. My breath is rapid. My eyes release tears, which I have accumulated over the years yet foolishly held back. I know who I am now. I know where I fit in now, because Mary has shown me what Jesus is all about: a dance of love, eternal and everlasting, which is spilled out upon me. I am a partner with God in a dance of love: receiving, giving, and sharing love, to be lavishly poured out into the world. In John's gospel, the story of Lazarus' being resuscitated and Mary's ludicrous act of pouring costly nard upon Jesus' feet inform one other. These stories are not just opposites: the stench of death versus the sweet smell of perfume, the bound corpse of Lazarus versus the free flowing, loose and arching body of Mary, the discovery of resuscitated life from the tomb, and the foreshadowing of death among life. To comprehend what it is that unlocks the secret not of resuscitated life, but new life, life drenched with love, offered to us, even unto and beyond death, we need to couple these stories together.

In each case, prompted by Mary's posture of humility, of pressing her calloused knees upon the hard-packed ground, within the tears of Jesus and the complete self-giving love of Mary for Jesus, the secret is found. For, the tears of Jesus hallowed a space within his soul for a depth of love, which gave Jesus the strength from God to command, "Lazarus, Come out!" The dance of love Mary offered Jesus through his anointed and caressed feet hallowed a space within his soul, again for a depth of love, which gave him the strength to continue his walk to the cross in Jerusalem.

This happens to us as well. When we give or receive love gone beautifully wild, when we love without counting costs, when we give extravagantly, when we pour out the ointment of our own lives, lavishly upon someone regardless of their deservedness, a healthy hallowing takes place within our own being. We create not a void nor an empty space, but an open place, which prepares us for the insight God desires to give us, which allows the space for Jesus to rule our hearts, and which transforms us into a translucent alabaster jar, ready to spill out the special ointment of our hearts.

When we give love away, we create room for God to show up in our lives. Jesus desperately needed Mary to show love gone beautifully wild that evening. He was on his way to Jerusalem to die on the cross.

And finally he knows that someone understands what he is all about and is inviting other people into this dance of love. Jesus' disciples, his closest friends with whom he traveled and broke bread each day were clueless about Jesus' kingship. They still expected a messiah who was about power, authority, and might, not the powerlessness of love.

It is true, Mary could have waited until the dinner guests had left and her brother, Lazarus and her sister Martha had gone into their own rooms to sleep. She could have waited until there was privacy between her and Jesus to anoint his feet and wipe them with her hair. But she didn't. She wanted this display of love to reveal Jesus' nature to all. It's called witnessing and it is how the kingdom grows.

We all have the same vocation, or calling, from God, and that is to love. In order for us to walk into the love poured out for the world in the resurrection we celebrate on Easter morning, we must first walk through Holy Week together: blushing a bit at the intimacy and awkwardness of having our feet washed and anointed by others, feeling the emptiness of a church without Jesus as the altar is stripped later that evening, nailing our sins, our perceived separateness from God, onto the hard wood of the cross, and finding our place in the salvation story of God's people, through lit candles and a bit of mystery on Easter Eve.

As we walk together, during these most holy days, I leave you with a question to ponder, **“Who in your life is in most need of the presence of your anointing love?”** It may be someone near and dear to you, with whom you share your life, or it could be a stranger at our community meal, wanting and waiting to be called your friend.

It may be someone who needs your anointing love to take an ever-so-small piece of his or her pain away; it may be someone whose heart is filled with joy, and the dance of love is a celebration. It may be someone you feel very close to, or it may be someone you are bitterly estranged from.

This act of sharing your anointing love may cost you nothing or everything. You may be like Mary's alabaster jar, filled to the brim, ready to spill out your anointing love and it will cost you nothing to give it away. Or you may need to crawl into a hard and cracked place within to find that buried love, sequestered in the caverns of a hardened heart, and it may cost you everything to go digging around.

Whatever your journey is these next few holy weeks, be assured that each time you discover and lavishly give your anointing love away, God hallows a space within your life, wherein you can receive the insights and strength God desires you to have, so that you will know the new life, which love can bring. This is the gift we will unwrap together on Easter morning.