

Imagine you are looking for a job. You see an ad that states the following:

Wanted:

- Someone willing to risk their good reputation.
- Someone willing to give away something worth \$40,000.
- Someone who must clean or shine the shoes of people attending a sold out special event at the Arden. (You'd have to do this in the foyer of the Arden as everyone comes in).

Would you sign up for that? Would you immediately call and put your name in for such an opportunity? No. We wouldn't do that for a job. From a financial perspective, that's a negative 40000 transaction. You could do a lot with 40,000 dollars. You could go on a great vacation. You could put on a neat addition or redo your kitchen. You could pay to go to a college in another city. You could get a new car or go on an adventure you'd always wanted to go on.

Besides the financial risk, there's the reputation question. A good reputation cannot be bought. You have to earn it and build it and continue to protect it. Risking your reputation is like risking your health. It can have long term consequences to risk your reputation.

Then there's the dirty part of the job. Cleaning and shining the shoes of people coming to a concert? It's one thing to be with strangers in a public place like a movie theater or hockey game or a banquet. It's another thing to clean their shoes for them. You would have to deal with mud and snow and dirt and scuffs. You might have to clean off some old runners that have seen their fair share of gym time. By the time you were done, your hands would be pretty dirty and maybe your clothes as well. And you couldn't hide. Everyone would have seen you doing it.

No. Of course we wouldn't sign up for something like that. But maybe would consider it if the life of a loved one depended on it. Say we lived under an oppressive regime. And our spouse or child or parent or brother or sister was imprisoned. The authorities sentenced them to death. But if you would risk your reputation, pay 40,000\$ and do this degrading work, they would release your loved one. Well, we might consider that.

Or what if there was a famous person coming to town. Maybe it's someone you really admire. You love their music or their acting or their work in Africa or their leadership. To meet them, you would have to do all of these things.

Would you do that? You'd have to risk all that – your reputation, a large sum of money and the work of shining other people's shoes. Well it would have to be someone pretty special.

But what if that person was Jesus? There was a woman who did exactly what we're talking about when Jesus came to town. She risked her reputation. She spent a huge amount of money. She performed one of the lowest jobs in the society. Yet what she did is remembered to this day. We're going to examine her remarkable act.

Easter Sunday is three weeks from today. In this Easter season, we continue in the preaching theme for this year – Pursuing an intentional apprenticeship under Jesus Christ. This connects to our emphasis on growing as disciples and disciple makers of Christ. We will look at how some people responded to Jesus' command to follow Him through the Easter week. Today we're going to look at the account that describes this startling event of a woman's self-forgetting act. I invite you to look for yourself somewhere in this story. I will do my best to draw the picture this account paints. Then we will think about what this might teach us for our continuing journey with Christ. I'm going to read 2 passages of the same event from two different gospels. Mark 14:3-9. Then John 12:1-8.

Mark 14:3-9 (ESV)

³ And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. ⁴ There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? ⁵ For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. ⁶ But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷ For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. ⁸ She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. ⁹ And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

John 12:1-8 (ESV)

Mary Anoints Jesus at Bethany

12 Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. ³ Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it^[a] for the day of my burial. ⁸ For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

Most scholars agree that Mark and John describe the same event. Both say it happened in Bethany at a table. A woman comes and anoints Jesus with perfume. Some there object to this. Jesus rebukes them and defends the woman.

There are some differences. Mark does not mention the woman by name. John identifies her as Mary this sister of Martha and Lazarus. This little family plays a big role in John's gospel. Immediately preceding this account John tells us about Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead. So he identifies that this family is involved in this incident. Mark mentions that some objected to the pouring out of this perfume. John singles out Judas. The most startling difference between the accounts is the description of the anointing. Mark says the woman anointed or poured the perfume on Jesus' head. John says she poured it on his feet and wiped it off with her hair.

But these are reconcilable. In Mark's account, Jesus says "she has anointed my body." If the woman only anointed Jesus' head or feet, it seems a bit strange that he would refer to that as his whole body. And the amount of perfume used indicates there would be way too much to anoint just the head or the feet. Mark and Matthew have reasons to focus on the anointing of the head. You anointed kings with oil when they were about to become kings. So they highlight that. But John has different reasons for focusing on Jesus' feet which we will get to in a moment. Mark speaks of the woman breaking the bottle to release the perfume. And he reports Jesus saying that wherever the gospel is preached the story will be told in memory of the woman, neither of which is in John. But John has his purposes which we will get to now.

The Setting (1)

John starts with the setting. It is six days before Passover. So by John's reckoning, it's the Saturday evening before Jesus' crucifixion. Friday night to Saturday was the Jewish Sabbath. So it's Saturday evening and a large crowd gathers for a community meal. Why? Jesus has come to their village, Bethany. Jesus was special to the people of Bethany? Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead there. In those days, everyone knew everyone in the village. Everyone knew that Lazarus died. Everyone knew that he had been in the tomb for four days. Everyone knew that Lazarus was now alive. Now the person who did this visited their village. So they host a spontaneous community dinner for Jesus. Lots of people come and bring food. Traditionally, the women served. So Martha, Lazarus' sister, participates in the serving. John tells us Lazarus was there and reclined with Jesus at the table.

Now to us that sounds weird. You don't recline at a table. It sounds like they had Lazy boy recliners around the table. But meals were held on tables that were about 2 or 3 feet off the ground. People didn't sit at the table but reclined on something kind of like a couch. So they lay on their side and propped themselves up. Their head and arms

were toward the table. Their feet went out away from the table. People come to see Jesus who brought the dead back to life and Lazarus who was dead. It's not every day you get to talk with someone who was dead for four days.

So they're having dinner and people are talking. Some or all of Jesus' disciples are there along with many others. In walks Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. We don't know who was older or younger or even how old they were. But Mary comes and does something that risks her reputation, costs her greatly and requires her to perform one of the lowest jobs in that culture. She brings out a bottle of very expensive perfume. It contained a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard. The term pound is the Greek *litra* from which we get our word liter. It was about 11 and a half ounces or 327 grams of liquid. That's a lot for perfume. If you wear perfume or cologne, you know you don't pour it out like a bottle of coke. You just dab it on different places to anoint your body with that fragrance.

This was no cheap perfume. It was pure nard coming from plants that grow in India or Nepal. To import them would have required a 4 to 5 months journey by camel. So anyone owning such a jar of this perfume would have to pay a high price for its purity and import. The expense of this bottle is obvious because when Judas objects to this, he places a monetary value on it – 300 denarii. One denarii was a day's wage for a common laborer. They worked 6 days a week except for Sabbath and feasts. So 300 denarii is basically a year's wage for a laborer. That's maybe 40,000 dollars today. So it is a pretty valuable jar of perfume. We don't know where she got it. Maybe the family was wealthy. Maybe this was a family heirloom passed down through generations for security and a rainy day fund. But Mark tells us she broke the jar's neck. So she didn't just pop off a cork and pour a little out. She didn't unscrew a lid so she could use some later. So broke the bottle so it would all come out.

Can you imagine that moment? All conversation must have stopped. She maybe begins by anointing Jesus' head like Mark describes. Then maybe she splashes some on his torso and lower body. And finally she pours it on Jesus' feet. If people had not yet noticed what was going on, they soon would. For the smell of the perfume permeated the entire house. Whether they were in the kitchen, upstairs, in the store room or in the dining area, they could smell this pure nard.

But the worst was yet to come. After wasting that entire bottle of expensive perfume on Jesus' head, body and feet, Mary lets down her hair. No respectable, upstanding, moral woman let down her hair in public. That was for women with questionable morals that you could find in certain parts of towns and cities. Has Mary lost her mind?

Would Martha intervene to save her sister from losing all her reputation? Would Lazarus jump up to usher her out and apologize to gathered guests for her? No. Apparently no one moved or said anything maybe because they were so shocked at the moment. Her hair comes down and she engages in a confusing act. She wipes the perfume she's just poured on Jesus' feet off with her hair.

We're way beyond shining shoes at the Arden theatre here. Who knows what state Jesus' feet were in? Because the dinner seemed spontaneous, maybe the house servants or the host didn't have time to wash the guest's feet. But Mary uses this most expensive perfume as the liquid and her hair as the towel.

What was Mary thinking through all this? We don't know. But to wash someone's feet was an act of humility and lowliness. In the next chapter, John will describe the Last Supper where Jesus rebukes the disciple's pride by washing their feet. Maybe Mary's act demonstrates her deep understanding of Jesus as her Lord. She appropriately responds by washing his feet in an act of devotion. But she also demonstrates that she was willing to risk it all for him. He gave her brother back through resurrection. She sat at his feet listening to his teaching while her sister Martha got distracted with many preparations. She seemed to understand far more than the disciples.

But she also accepted Jesus' mission. She somehow grasped that he who had raised her brother to life would Himself have to die. Anointing an entire body with perfume was not unusual in their culture. It was only unusual if the person was still alive. Remember we're talking first century. When people died, you buried them within the first day or laid them in a tomb. Decay began quickly. But the family might want to visit a day or two or maybe three after death. The only way this was possible in that hot climate was to mask the pungent death odor with loads of perfume and spices. That's why Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea will anoint Jesus' body with heavy spices after his death on the cross.

But here Mary does it prior to Jesus' death. Perhaps she was saving this bottle for that time. But maybe when she saw Jesus there she knew the time was near. She lost all sense of herself, her reputation, her status in the society and the cost of perfume. Instead, she gave it all up to honor her Lord and anoint him for burial prior to death. The lingering smells of that perfume in her hair must have been precious 6 days later when he died on the cross.

But as is the case often in Jesus' time, people did not understand the significance of this event. Judas Iscariot, the one who would betray speaks up. He didn't just speak up. He was mad. Mark tells us "some said to themselves

‘Why was the ointment wasted like that?’” And they scolded her. John doesn’t include those details. He just points out Judas’ question “Why was the ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” That’s actually a pretty good point Judas. You could dig a lot of wells with 40,000 dollars. You could help a lot of people in St. Albert with 40,000. Didn’t Jesus come to preach good news to the poor?

But John, writing after everything happened in Easter week reveals Judas’ motive. “He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.” So when Jesus and the disciples travelled they needed money to pay for lodging or meals. Sometimes they might have collected something for the poor. Judas is given charge of this bag. Yet they later figured out he stole and used some of the money for himself.

So we’ve got this stunning act of devotion, humbling and worship of Jesus by Mary. The first response is indignation and scolding. The people there must have been riveted. What is going to happen now? Jesus speaks and surely he too would side with Judas. “Thank you Mary. I appreciate your gesture but Judas is right. You should have used it for the poor.”

No. Jesus said, “Leave her alone so that she may keep it or she intended to keep it for my burial.” So Jesus defends Mary. But then he mentions his burial which might have seemed strange in that context. Yet maybe it reveals how full his mind was of coming events. If you know you’re going to die in 6 days, you likely have a lot on your mind. He sees a connection between this act and his burial. Then he says “the poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me.” So Jesus is not saying that Mary or anyone should never give to the poor. But there would always be opportunity for that. Jesus had six more days of life on earth, followed by parts of three days in the tomb followed by 40 days of resurrection appearances before his ascension. Time was short. Mary took the opportunity to pour herself out upon Jesus in a dramatic, sincere act of devotion and worship.

What about you and me? How do you respond to Mary’s act? Is your first reaction questioning, doubt and skepticism about its value? Do you value reputation, your possessions and your social standing so much that you would withhold yourself from Jesus if what he asked you cost you in any of those areas? Mary’s act forces us to think deeply about our response to Jesus.

We don't know much about her life before meeting Jesus. We don't know if she had a good or bad reputation. But she did treat Jesus as Lord and God over her life. Maybe we err on the side of treating Jesus just with common courtesy. "Yes, come and sit at our table Jesus. We will briefly acknowledge you with table grace and then get on with what we really want to do with life. Yes Jesus, you can come into my life. But stay in the back room until I really need you. Yes, Jesus I believe in you and receive you as Lord. But actually, I don't want anyone to know about you so would you mind if we just met in dark closets so that no one would suspect I know you."

Have we forgotten how much we've been forgiven? Has it slipped our minds that he's already brought us from death to life? Have we become so hard hearted and sterile in our approach to Jesus that we can't even rejoice in worship of him? Or we frown when we see others rejoicing in and worshipping Him?

Mary got it. She discovered that the most important place for her to spend her life was at the feet of Jesus looking for ways to say "I love you."