

A Baccalaureate Sermon: Smashing Beauty

Mark 14:1-11; Psalm 16

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So are you packed yet? For those of you who haven't finished, or started, I have two pieces of advice: (1) bubble wrap; (2) no witnesses. *Do not allow anyone in the room with you when you are packing until you have decided what you will keep, and what you will leave behind.* Otherwise, there will be fights, and hurt feelings, because other persons will not value your stuff the way you do. They will advise you to toss your plastic cup and pom-pom collection.¹ They will not grasp the importance of keeping all twenty-six of your college t-shirts. They will fail to see the feng shui in your arrangement of Christmas lights and plastic blow-up furniture. They will try to talk you out of the stolen street sign and the life-size cutout of Jackie Chan. They are unlikely to see your commitment to nineteen lone socks—and the possibility that one of their lost mates may turn up again—as a vivid expression of Christian hope. My advice is to go in your room, lock your door, and refuse to come out until you have duct-taped the boxes shut. *No witnesses.*

Moving is highly emotional work. Because let's be honest: you can't take it all with you. But as the housing office keeps reminding you, it all has to go, somewhere, by Sunday—if not with you, then into the dumpster. So you empty every drawer, and sort through your entire college experience: your first freshman English paper; ticket stubs and restaurant match books; e-mail addresses of people you met on spring break; the poem you wrote the night you got your heart broken; letters from your grandmother; pictures your friends took on your twenty-first birthday that you really *cannot* show your parents. You go through everything, and you relive each moment, and when you're done, what you've got left is an empty room and some boxes labeled "PC, 2003." The stuff in those boxes won't ever be as valuable to anyone as it is to you. You couldn't sell most of it at a garage sale. But this is not about money. This is about your life—who you were, who you grew to be, for a few years in Clinton, South Carolina.

It's a wonderful thing, actually, to have a choice about what you want to pack up and take with you; what you want to remember, and what you're willing to let go. Because we don't always get that choice, do we? Sometimes there are burdens you just have to carry for a while. Sometimes there are memories that won't leave you alone. Sometimes there are secrets you are tired of keeping. You wish you could dump them, but you can't, not yet; so you keep lug-

ging them around with you, every day, wishing your boxes weren't so heavy. I hope you don't have many of those to carry out of here. But if you do have some—and all of us do, at one time or another—then pack this story from Mark, and take it with you on Sunday.

Mark says, there was this party. It was a for-men-only-party, which was normal in those days; the brothers didn't eat with the sisters, and every night was frat night. Jesus was at the party. It wasn't his fraternity, and he was no pledge, but he got an invitation anyway. And *right* in the middle of the roast lamb and olives, a woman came into the room.... You don't look shocked. You're supposed to be shocked, as if I'd just said, "And the Queen of England waltzed in, stark naked." Listen to this: *men were eating, and a woman walked into the room*. I don't care who she was—some stranger off the street or Jesus' friend Mary or the hired after-hours entertainment, so to speak; it just wasn't done. In fact, it's so shocking that Mark doesn't even identify her, like the other gospel writers do; he just says, *she was a woman*, and that's more information than we wanted to hear. Well, even if *you* aren't stunned, I bet those men were; I bet they choked on their olives. Especially after what happened next.

The woman walked over to Jesus, took out an alabaster jar of perfumed oil that cost more than a house, broke it open, and poured it on Jesus' head. Any man in his right mind would have been appalled at this behavior. He would have leaped to his feet, screamed something along the lines of, *How dare you???*, and made a run for a bucket of water to wash off the mess. Not Jesus. It's the oddest thing; he didn't say a word. Every man around him was choking and spluttering and snorting like a horse, as the Greek so elegantly puts it—which makes me think they'd gulped their wine up the wrong passage. And some of them lit into her, yelling that this was the *stupidest* waste of money they'd ever seen, they could have put together *such* a sweet deal with that oil, they could have made *so* much money, they could have fed every poor person in Jerusalem—no! in *Israel!*—with the money they could have made, and *look*, she just *poured* it right down the *drain*...splutter, splutter, splutter. Jesus told them to shut up and leave her alone. Don't even go there, he said—*especially* about what you could have done with the money. She hasn't done anything wrong; she's done a beautiful thing for me. If you want to feed the poor, feed the poor. She's done what she could; she's anointed my body before it's time to put it in the tomb. And people will remember that, he told them. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

Now, there are a lot of ways you can read this text. You can read it as a kind of mysterious identification ritual, which is how a lot of scholars see it. The woman figures out Jesus is the messiah and anoints him, the way you anoint a king. And because she uses this very expensive oil that was usually saved for funerals, Jesus picks up on the symbolism of it and says, She hasn't just anointed

me for power; she's anointed me for death, because *this* king is going to *suffer* and *die*. That's one way to read this text.

Another way is to read it as an act of resistance. Roman law defined Caesar as god, and demanded that every subject bow down and worship him. But the woman anoints *Jesus*, and that is tantamount to saying, *There is a greater king and a greater power in this world than Caesar!* Basically, she was daring every man in the room to join her in an act of civil disobedience to the empire that easily could get them all killed. That's another way to read this text.

Still another is what I think of as the adolescent mythology of grandiosity, in which the woman is a fearless young adult who believes in Jesus but doesn't really believe in her own mortality, and so does outrageous things like crashing stag parties and smashing jars with thousands of dollars of oil in them, just to make a statement. Sort of a "find your own voice," "coming of age" reading—what you might get if you crossed Greenpeace with Madonna.

But I'm reading this text very differently, now. I see the mystery, and the politics, and the outrageousness of it, but they don't strike me as much as something else, which is this: the oil in that alabaster jar wasn't the oil of life. It was the oil of death: *her* death. It was so expensive you might have to take out a loan to buy it, but you didn't have a choice about that; it's just what you did, in those days, if you were a nice person; you paid all you had in life for a little jar of this stuff that just sat on a shelf, waiting for you to die. And the woman took that jar and she smashed it to pieces; and I think that is *amazing*.

I've been thinking about that alabaster jar. I've been thinking about the things we stuff into jars, because there isn't any other place to put them. All the burdens. All the secrets. All the memories that won't leave us in peace. All the voices that whisper in our heads, *You wouldn't be any good at that, so don't even try!* I've been thinking about how expensive those things are, how they cost us so much in tears and worry and sleepless nights. How much life they bleed away from us until what we've got is a jar of death. So we replace the stoppers, cork up the jars, and lift them as carefully as we can to a safe place, because alabaster is fragile, and if we break those jars, we are scared to death to think of what might happen.

The text says the woman broke open the jar, but it wasn't like breaking an egg—one light tap, and a flick of the wrist. She *pulverized* that thing; she *smashed* it! It's an unusual Greek word, the same one in the Septuagint for what Moses did to the stone tablets when he came down from Sinai and saw the golden calf; the same word for what the crazy guy in the graveyard did to his chains. It's the Greek word for what you do to bones, and manacles, and stone tablets when your people are worshipping idols—and I don't think this is a coincidence. Breaking open that alabaster jar is like breaking the chains that bind you. Breaking open that alabaster jar is like crushing the bones that haunt you. Breaking open

that alabaster jar is like smashing stone tablets over the backs of idols. It's not an accident, this kind of smashing. You have to mean it. You have to want it. You have to sweat for it. And Jesus saw that; he saw that the woman was breaking open her own jar of death and offering him the oil; and he called it *beautiful...beautiful*.

There are so many ways to smash an alabaster jar and break open your own jar of death. I know a woman who finally found the courage to tell her parents about the terrible things her older brother did to her when she was a little girl. I know a man who finally admitted that he was depressed, and needed help, and called his friend for the name of a doctor. I know a woman who finally was brave enough to realize that she didn't really want to marry the boy next door and settle down—not yet, anyway. I know a man who finally faced the fact that he had an addiction, and a secret life, and it was eating him alive. I know a woman who loved to write, and decided to give it a few years to see if she could make a living at it. So many people have had to pack things in jars and boxes that they never wanted to carry around, and they've dragged those heavy loads for years. They've put the stoppers in those jars and tried not to think about what was in them. But the day comes, you know? The time comes. *You have to move*. You have to clear out this space that is suffocating you. And maybe a friend comes by with some garbage bags, and gives them to you, and says, You know, *you don't have to take all this stuff with you*. You can let some of those burdens go. You can break open some of those secrets. You can smash the power of some of those memories so they don't chain you up and torment you any longer. You see, you *don't* have to take it all with you, thanks be to God! You can tell those nagging, critical voices that you just don't believe them anymore. You can choose the things that give you life, and leave the rest at the cross; just *leave it!* *Smash!* go the jars. *Gush!* goes the oil. Out it flows, and in its place wells up the unconditional love of God. And Jesus watches; and he says, *beautiful...beautiful!*

It isn't what the other men at the dinner party say. They didn't see the beauty; they saw a mess. They called it a waste. They looked at that oil as something *they* could have sold for a profit, not something that was costing her everything. And that happens, sometimes, when you smash open an alabaster jar. It makes people angry. It makes them scared. It challenges the world they measure in dollars, or deals, or grades, or husbands. It may make them wonder why they keep bowing down to the emperor instead of doing what gives them joy, or resisting what they know is wrong. It may even make them decide to go to the high priests to betray you. So they splutter, and say, *What a waste! What a waste!* And the litany begins:

He's such a nice boy; what if this is your last chance, dear?

Are you sure you can really live off your “talent”?

Why can’t you just be happy and forget what happened at the party that night?

Why do you have to ruin our perfect group of friends, our perfect family, our perfect company, our perfect church, by speaking up and telling the truth?

Why can’t you just exercise some willpower and tell yourself you won’t look at that stuff on the internet anymore?

Why can’t you just be stronger...tougher...happier...*more normal*?

You know what? The toughest thing you will ever do is to smash an alabaster jar. The bravest thing you will ever do is to face what you’ve been carrying around and bottling up that you *know* is death for you. And the most amazing love you will ever know will flow through you like warm springs of life when you decide to tell the truth, and clear out the mess, and live in God’s joy, and lay the burdens down at the foot of the cross.

Listen. Keep the life-size model of Jackie Chan and the plastic pompoms if you want to. But don’t think you have to take it *all* with you; you don’t. You can let some of it go. You can lay some of it down. You can decide what goes, what stays, and, you can apply your own duct tape. You can pursue the work that gives you life, not just the work you think you *ought* to do and that slowly bleeds you dry. You can measure the cost of things in something other than dollars. You can ask your friends and your families to help you haul off the garbage to the dumpster, and carry the other boxes to the car. That’s what moving is. That’s what growing is. You get to do it your whole life. You get a lot of alabaster jars to break open over the years. And every time you take one and smash it, Jesus is right there, with a smile on his face, saying, *beautiful...beautiful!*²

Notes

1. With thanks to a number of Columbia students (all relatively recent college graduates), who, when asked about things college students move out of their rooms, responded with many of the following items.

2. This sermon was preached at the Presbyterian College Baccalaureate Service in Clinton, South Carolina, on May 9, 2003.