

Mark begins his account of the suffering of Jesus on Wednesday, two days before Good Friday. And the day before, on Tuesday, Jesus had silenced all of his opponents. He had shown them very clearly from the Scriptures that he was the Christ, but they were not able to answer him a word. And then Jesus also foretold the destruction of the temple and the coming end of the world. And because of this, the chief priests and the scribes have now fully rejected him. They are now seeking to destroy him, even giving money to Judas in order to betray him. And the reason they did this, Christians, was because they didn't understand who Jesus was. If they had understood who Jesus was, they would've received him. They would've accepted him as the Christ, accepted him as the son of David. But they don't understand, and so they reject him. And they are now seeking to kill him.

But in the meantime, Jesus is up in Bethany, a couple miles north of Jerusalem, the home of people like Lazarus and Mary and Martha. He's in the home of one Simon the leper, probably called that because he once had leprosy. And he's eating a very ordinary meal on what was otherwise an ordinary day. But then something extraordinary happens. A woman comes in, and she's carrying with her a flask of nard. And nard is a perfume, something that is imported all the way from the mountains of India. So you can imagine, if you know your geography well enough, how far it is from India all the way to Israel, how much effort it took to get this perfume to Jerusalem. That in itself would make this perfume very expensive. But we're also told that this perfume was a pure nard. It was a very high quality, so it's a very expensive thing indeed.

And she does a remarkable thing. She takes this very expensive bottle of perfume, she breaks the jar, and pours it all onto the head of Jesus. Now, we would expect her to do something like this, because it was common in those days, in the time of the Bible, to put perfume and oils on the head of your guests. Think of Psalm 23, for example, verse 5, which says: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Putting perfume on somebody's head was a way of welcoming them into your house, to say that you are welcome here, and that we're glad to have you. It was a very nice thing to do. So that part was expected. And we might even expect her to use an expensive perfume like this to really show how much Jesus meant to her. That part's not surprising either. But what is surprising is that she broke the whole bottle. She pours the entire thing onto Jesus' head. He's practically drenched in it. You can imagine this oil just dripping down on every part of his body. Jesus even says, "She anointed my body." So you can see Jesus wet and dripping with the stuff, so that I'm sure the whole house was filled with the smell. He is completely covered in this nard. This woman has held nothing back in showing her devotion to the Lord.

But it causes a little bit of a stir in the house. Because the people who are at dinner with Jesus are upset. "Why would she do this? This is improper. This is totally out of line. Why would she waste it like this? Yeah, we could understand if she used a little bit. That would've been nice. That would've been the right thing to do. But to break the jar and use all of it? It's just not right. It's such a waste. This perfume is so expensive." The Bible tells us that it was worth three hundred denarii. Just one denarius is what you get paid for working a day. It's your day's wage. So three hundred denarii would be most of your year's wages. You can imagine this perfume costing tens of thousands of dollars in our money today. That's how expensive it was. That's how rare it was. But she just uses it all. "What a waste!" they say. "At least you could've sold it and given some of the money to the poor. Then it wouldn't be such a waste."

But the reason they thought this, Christians, was because they too did not understand what Jesus was doing. They did not understand what he was going to do. In fact, all the way back in Mark 9, Jesus tells them: "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But then St. Mark tells us that "they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him." They don't get it. Even though Jesus has told them clearly what's going to happen, they misunderstand what he is doing. They do not understand why he is about to suffer. All they can focus on is this perfume, and in any other case, they would probably be right.

But this woman understood something that they did not. This woman understood that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, that something was about to happen in this moment that would not ever happen again. And so she in her devotion to her Lord does this act of pouring out the perfume. Jesus even says: "You're going to have the poor with you at all times. You will have many opportunities to help them. But you will not always have me." This is a once for all kind of thing. There is not going to be another chance. And so the woman comes to Jesus to anoint him, to show her devotion in this way, because she understood in a way that no one else did what Jesus was about to do. And Jesus praises her for her understanding.

And Christians, do we misunderstand what Jesus is doing? Do we misunderstand the purpose of his suffering? Do we listen to the passion of our Lord and come to some other conclusion than what we should? Let me use an example. Do we feel sorry for Jesus? Does hearing about his suffering make us say, "Oh poor Jesus! He's having such a terrible day. What a terrible thing that has happened to him!" If that's our response, Christians, to hearing about our Lord suffering, it shows that we have missed something. We have not fully understood why he's doing what he's doing. Jesus is not having a bad day. He is not getting the short end of the stick. Jesus is willingly suffering for us to forgive us our sins. If there's anybody that we should feel sorry for, if there's anybody we should feel pity for, it's ourselves, because our sins drove him to do this.

If we hear about our Lord's passion indifferently, if hearing about his suffering makes us say, "Okay, that's interesting," kind of like hearing a history book. We learn something about the life of Jesus, but it doesn't influence us in any way. It doesn't lead us to change anything about how we're living. If that's the case, then we have not fully understood what Jesus is doing. Because if we understand what he's doing, then we will be moved to change. We will be moved to repent, to turn away from our sins. Because Jesus came to make us new. He suffers so that we would be renewed, so that we would be given a new heart, so that we would become one with him. If we aren't moved to change our ways, then we need to confess that sin too, confess our hardness of heart.

Or if we find ourselves indifferent towards Jesus, hear about what he has done and the things that he has suffered, and we say, "Okay. What else? That's nice." It doesn't lead us to feel gratitude towards him. Then we have misunderstood why he is suffering. Because we haven't realized the depth of what he's doing, because we haven't realized the seriousness of our sins. But if we understand the seriousness of our sins, Christians, and we understand the seriousness of what Jesus is doing, how would we not be moved to gratitude? To give to him thanksgiving and all kinds of things as a way of saying thank you for what he has done? Because Jesus suffers for us even though we didn't deserve it, even though he didn't have to do it, but he does it out of his

love for us. And so, this woman becomes an example, then, of one who loves much because she has been forgiven much. She sees how much she owes to Jesus, and she wants to do whatever she can, however small it may be, to say thank you for that. May we, Christians, be moved to do the same!

But more than this, Jesus tells us that what she is doing is going to be remembered. And she is remembered. We're hearing about it today. God wrote it down in the Bible what she did for Jesus. Because this act is more than just gratitude, this act shows us something about what Jesus is about to do. This woman and her nard helps us to understand what is going to happen. Because Jesus says that she has prepared his body for burial. She has anointed him for the grave. Now, that also was a sign of respect in those days. You think of Easter morning when the women are going to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. They want to show respect. It was a way of showing your final respects to someone who had died. But the women on Easter morning weren't able to do it, because the body wasn't there! Jesus had risen from the dead. And so this woman in anointing him now is preparing him for his death, because there's not going to be time after he has died. He's not going to be in the grave long enough to be anointed after he dies! Jesus would go into the grave, just as he said that he would, but after three days, he would rise again. And so this woman's action is a sign of the Gospel itself: that Jesus would not stay dead, that he's not going to have time to get all the usual funeral arrangements, because God would not let his Holy One see corruption, as Psalm 16 says. Jesus would rise, and the grave will not be able to hold him.

And so may this woman and her nard, her perfume, help us to understand what Jesus is doing. Jesus suffers, yes, and he will die. But he will not stay dead. Jesus goes to the cross, yes, and he will die to forgive us our sins and to rise again. And Jesus knows that the Gospel will go out into all the world. He knows that his work is not yet done. He knows all of this, and yet goes willingly to suffer on our behalf. This one simple act helps us to see and to understand what Jesus is doing. This woman helps us to understand why he suffers the way that he does. This woman helps us to understand who Jesus is.

So may we, Christians, in this Lenten season understand Jesus rightly. May we turn from our sins because of what he has done. May we turn towards him in gratitude for his death and his resurrection. And may we see in his suffering our own salvation and to rightly understand what that means for us today. Jesus suffers for us so that we would be set free from bondage to sin.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, whom you have given to be the forgiveness of our sins. Help us always to understand what he has done for us rightly, so that we may show our gratitude to you both now and in eternity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.