

It's ridiculous.
 Scandalous.
 Wasteful.

Mary pours a pound of costly oil,
 a year's wages worth of perfume,
 and uses her hair
 to wipe Jesus' feet.

It's ridiculous because
 the act is out of the ordinary.
 This is no ordinary amount.
 No ordinary occurrence.
 It is surely *a new thing!*
 Extravagant. Abundant.
 Overly generous.

And some may say it's
 scandalous
 because of its intimacy.
 This is a sensual undertaking,
 the smell of spikenard filling onlookers' nostrils
 as Mary bends before Jesus' sweaty feet.
 Like watching two dancers without knowing the pair's next move,
 Mary and Jesus' fleshly proximity perhaps
 makes the onlooking dinner guests uncomfortable.

And by some accounts it's wasteful.
 Judas brings that point up for us.
 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii
 and the money given to the poor?"
 Or rather, as Saint Luke's parenthetical note offers,
 Why wasn't this money given . . . to me . . . to Judas?

The "Why?" question indeed lingers.
 Not only Judas' but also the larger question,
Why does Mary do this?
 What reason, impulse, motive, desire

possesses her
to do
this ridiculous, scandalous, wasteful act?

I think her hair provides a clue.
Anointing Christ's feet with the fragrant nard,
she wipes the oil off with her hair.

Hair, of course, retains smell.
REALLY retains it.
Think of the times you spent the evening
in a bar or nightclub,
or around a campfire or fire pit,
after which your hair reeked of smoke.
Think of going to the hairdresser or barber,
who uses different products from yours at home,
and you leave smelling different.

I think
Mary anoints Jesus and then wipes the nard with her hair
because she wants to smell like Christ.

She wants to leave that dinner
sharing the same fragrance as Christ.
She wants to walk away from the last time she might see her Lord and friend
alive
with his scent lingering in her nostrils,
even if it is also
the scent of death.

For Mary and Jesus and all the guests
know when the nard was supposed to be used:
"She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."
Nard is the smell not only of living-Jesus
but also of dead-Jesus.
And Mary wants to smell like Jesus,
even like Jesus would smell upon his death.

That's weird, right?
 Mary wanting to smell like—
 to take upon herself—
 to vicariously share in Christ's death.
 What's even stranger
 is that she's not the only one.
 Later, another friend of Jesus' wants the same thing.

Paul wants to share in Jesus' death too.
 And he is willing to be ridiculous and scandalous and wasteful
 and lose precious things in the process.
 "Whatever gains I had,"
 Saint Paul writes to the Philippians,
 "I have come to regard [them] as loss
 because of Christ."
 Like Mary pouring a year's savings worth of oil out upon Jesus,
 Paul wants to lose all of his prestige and standing for Christ:
 the advantages of his birth,
 his hard-won career,
 his own sense of being right and blameless;
 you could say Paul desires to DIE
 to all that privilege.
 "More than that," he summarizes,
 "I regard everything as loss"
 as "rubbish"
 "because of the surpassing value of
 knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

Some—many—see Paul's desire to forfeit his advantages
 as ridiculous and scandalous and wasteful.
 He's someone who WANTS to give up his comfortable life,
 wants to willingly relinquish precious things
 because of Christ.
 No wonder people think Paul is weird.

But for Paul, this loss
 is his "becoming like Christ in his death."
 Paul seeks Christ,

to share even the sufferings of Christ,
even share in Christ's death.

And Paul wants this death
because Jesus has changed the power of death.
Death, Paul notes,
is not the final target.
The final aim is resurrection:
"By becoming like Christ in his death . . .
I want to know Christ and power of his resurrection . . .
I press on to make the *resurrection* from the dead
my goal," says Paul.
He presses on to make Christ's death and resurrection
his own death and resurrection
because Christ has made Paul to be
Christ's
own.

Just as Christ called Mary to be his own.
In her lavish anointing,
Mary wants Christ's death to be her own
BECAUSE she understands Christ's resurrection would be hers, too.

From the outside, Mary's costly anointing
and Paul's desired downward mobility
as ways of sharing in the death of Christ
sparks our sense of impropriety.
In our youth-loving, merit-based, self-promoting culture,
wanting to share in someone's death sounds ridiculous and scandalous and
wasteful.
Because when we consider death or dying-to-things or losing-things,
we fear it;
we do all we can to preserve ourselves and our reputations;
we collect or hoard resources up until the end.

According to the standards of our world,
to conform our lives to Christ's sufferings,
to willingly enter the pain and grief of the world,

to bend our own trajectories toward the outsiders and sinners
 who Christ loves,
 to give up hard-earned resources for the poor,
 these are ridiculous and scandalous and wasteful things to do.
 They feel weird to do.
 They are scary and mysterious unnerving actions,
 just like death itself—and Christ's death—
 is scary and mysterious and unnerving.

The Good News is that death is not the final point.
 The final aim is resurrection.
 Through his death,
 Christ forever changed the power of death,
 and through his resurrection,
 and Christ opened for us new, abundant, eternal, free, and fearless life.
 Christ Jesus has made us his own,
 so Christ's death AND resurrection are our own.

And since death has been changed,
 since its power has been vanquished,
 now it's quite natural for us Christians to want
 to share in the sufferings of Christ
 and for Christ's death to be our own.

Without Christ's resurrection, death is scary.
 Without eternal life, we fear all kinds of death:
 of our bodies, of our resources, of our privilege.
 Yet with eternal life,
 where, o death, is your sting?
 With resurrection,
 we are free. We have nothing to fear.

Once we no longer fear death,
 once we have and await and take to heart Christ's resurrection
 like Mary and Paul,
 then wanting to do all those seemingly ridiculous and scandalous and wasteful
 things
 isn't so weird after all.

We no longer need fear losing face for our welcome of others, sinners, and outcasts.

We no longer need to be scared of casting aside personal advantage.

We no longer need fret over whether there will be enough.

We can let go of what seems precious but will never satisfy.

We can share—really share—with those who suffer.

Because Christ has changed the power of death.

We are free to want what Christ offers THROUGH death:

the ridiculous, scandalous, extravagant life

of resurrection.

AMEN.