

“What’s That Smell?”

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First in a Lent series on John 12

John 11:55-12:11

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Please read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

The house was filled with the aroma. . . .

What’s that smell? Celebration!

Jesus is in town again. Last time it was when Lazarus’ died. Jesus wrecked the funeral when he raised Lazarus back to life. Now here sits Jesus beside Lazarus — can anyone take their eyes off either of them? It’s celebration!

What’s that smell? Feasting!

Martha is at her best, again! She’s prepared a feast a king would envy. It’s for Jesus. He’s the King, the Messiah, the Christ, the true Ruler of God’s People. In Jesus, God is claiming God’s People, and the whole world, back from all the corruption that’s taken over. Jesus Messiah will rule with God’s power and justice. It’s a feast!

They eat the food and drink the wine. Everyone is having a good time.

II

But what’s that smell?

Mary?

We’ve got a few stories of a woman anointing Jesus’ feet or his head with fragrance.¹ And there were many Marys; it was a very common name. So the details between the stories and the Marys easily get muddled and confused. Rumours start too. So to clarify, this was Mary of Bethany, not Mary Magdalene. Neither “Mary” was a prostitute or anything like that. Nor was there any hint that Jesus was married or romantically involved with either of them or anyone else.

So, back to that smell. What is it?

Nard!?!

¹ In addition to this one, a very similar episode is told in Mark 14:3-9 (paralleled in Matthew 26:6-13), though there are important differences too. It’s likely these are accounts of the same event. Another episode is recounted in Luke 7:36-50; quite clearly this is a different event.

Nard is a thick, essential oil. It comes from a plant that only grows high in the Himalayas. Nard was very valuable as perfume, incense, medicine and food seasoning.² For the rich. Nard was very expensive. The name “Bethany,” this town of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, just outside Jerusalem, means “House of the Poor.”³ How did Mary from Bethany have expensive nard on hand? I have not idea.

What’s that smell?

Foot washing!?!

Being forced to wash someone’s feet was demeaning. However, choosing to wash someone’s feet was a powerful sign. It showed your devotion, your love, your gratitude, your willingness to serve them, and the honour you gave to them.⁴

What’s that smell?

Mary is honouring Jesus her rabbi, with extravagance. She is washing his feet with nard.

III

Nard smells sweet, earthy and musky. It’s a strong smell that fills the house.

What do you smell?

Mary, at it again!!

Both sisters love Jesus and trust him. Both have seen what he can do. But unlike Mary, Martha knows her place. Theirs was a very gender-divided culture. Women prepared the food and served it. Men studied with the rabbi. Martha knows this. But Mary . . . this has come up before. Another time, Mary had sat with the men to learn from Jesus. Martha spoke her objection, but Jesus congratulated Mary.⁵ She acts like a disciple. She is a disciple, a student of rabbi Jesus. We almost take this for granted now, but realize how radical it was when Jesus welcomed women and men to follow him and be his students, to share in the intimacy of the rabbi-disciple relationship. This got people talking.

What do you smell?

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spikenard> and www.mapleholistics.com/blog/spikenard-essential-oil-benefits

³ N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 22.

⁴ Bruner cites Augenstein: “Footwashing in antiquity is a despicable slave-worthy task. A Jewish server ought not to be forced to such slave work. Therefore in Jewish custom footwashing was only known as the work of a non-Jewish slave. . . . But when done from free will, it can also express the love between two free persons. So in Israel a woman could wash her husband’s feet out of love . . . also children [their father’s feet] . . . [It is] a showing of honor, too . . . so that students could wash the feet of their rabbis.” Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 702.

⁵ Luke 10:38-42.

Scandal!!

I don't think Mary means it sexually. I don't think Jesus takes it that way. But others? That gender-divide meant that men and women were very careful about how they related in public, especially if they were unrelated. No touching. Maybe no talking. Women kept their heads covered. Jesus has already played loose with those taboos. Following him, being his disciple is an invitation for everyone. But this! Mary, touching, washing, fragancing Jesus' feet! Mary, drying them with her unbound hair! Jesus, letting her!⁶

What do you smell?

Waste!!

Judas has no credibility. His devotion to the way of Jesus is falling apart. His dishonesty is becoming clear. Still . . . she is pouring out nard! A lot of it! It could have bought meals for thousands of people.⁷ Whatever Judas' motives, is he right? I'm sure the poor people of Bethany and many other places could use that money.

IV

What does Jesus smell?

Death? His death?

This party is a celebration of life. Lazarus is here!

This party is a getting-ready. The next day, Jesus is going to parade into Jerusalem, leading a crowd proclaiming their king! People are ready for this. Jesus' disciples — men, women and children — and crowds crushing into the city for the annual Passover feast of national liberation, they are all ready and waiting for Jesus to stir them up. Jesus is trending! Reporters are working their sources to find out where he is and what he's planning.

Others are looking for him too. The authorities are pumping their networks of informants, hoping to stop Jesus before he gets started.

⁶ Craig Keene observes: "[G]iven the taboos of the very pious against even speaking with women, and undoubtedly the suspicions of most people when too much cross-gender affection between non-relatives appeared in public, her action would probably seem immoral to many bystanders if they were present." Quoted in Bruner 698.

⁷ Judas says that the nard was worth 300 denarii. A denarius was what a labourer would receive for a days' work. So I figured out what a minimum waged (\$14/hour) worker would get for a 40-hour work week over a 50 week year, and it works out to \$28,000. Another way of looking at it is using the episode in John 6, where 200 denarii is said to be what it would cost to feed a meal to 5,000.

But here's Jesus . . . talking about . . . his death.

"Let her be," he says to Judas and anyone else looking down on Mary. *"Those poor you are so concerned about"* — and no one is more devoted to them than Jesus — *"you will always have them with you."* In other words, we have countless opportunities to serve the poor, bless them, help them, act with love to them. Let's not use Jesus' words here as an excuse to ignore the poor or be complacent about poverty. That would be a betrayal of Jesus, maybe as much as Judas'.

"But you won't always have me," says Jesus.

*"What Mary has done is very appropriate for my burial."*⁸

I don't imagine Mary is thinking about Jesus' death at all. But Jesus is. He knows what he is coming toward. On those feet she's just anointed, Jesus is walking willingly to his death.

V

It's Lent. We're walking with Jesus too. This year, we're working through 12th chapter of John's Gospel. This anointing of Jesus by Mary is the first episode. The next is Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem; we'll skip it and come back to it on Palm Sunday. This begins the last week of Jesus' life. Almost half of John's Gospel — 9 chapters — is about this one week.

At this dinner party that starts it off, Jesus makes it so clear where he is going.

We've already had hints:

- Back near the beginning, when John the Baptizer pointed to Jesus and proclaimed: *"Look! The sacrificial lamb of God, who will take away the world's sin."*⁹
- Also near the beginning, when Jesus disrupted the sacrifices in the Temple, and spoke of his own body being torn down and rebuilt.¹⁰
- When Thomas, without a doubt, talked about going and dying with Jesus.¹¹
- With the cloud of opposition growing, and the authorities resolving to put Jesus to an end.¹²

⁸ The sentence in verse 7 literally reads, *"She bought [the perfume] so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."* It's tricky to make sense of this. It's not the day of Jesus' burial; he's still obviously alive. Nor has she kept it for that coming day; it's all over Jesus' feet. Still, I think Jesus' meaning is quite clear: he is linking her actions with his soon-to-come death.

⁹ John 1:29.

¹⁰ John 2:13-22. This episode when Jesus symbolically stopped the Temple's operations happened during the last week, as the other Gospels make clear. John's Gospel brings it forward to near the beginning of Jesus' ministry, so this event of confrontation and hint of death and resurrection will shape how we read everything that follows.

¹¹ John 11:16. Thomas is too-often remembered for his "doubting" (see 20:24-29), but rarely for his final and profound proclamation of Jesus (20:28), nor his faithful willingness to suffer and die with Jesus.

¹² 11:47-53.

This is where the story is going . . . to his burial. It has to.

VI

What's that smell?

It's the beautiful smell of a disciple like us, serving her Master with celebration and gratitude. It's a feast of extravagance. It's brokenness healed and life resurrected. It's scandalous love poured out wastefully, because that's what love does. It's joy.

What's that smell?

It's Jesus.

When we walk with Jesus on this road, this is what he draws from us and gives to us, this smell of delight. Our joy in Jesus is what others can smell from us. Even in Lent, let's "give off" this delight of the Lord.

What's that smell?

It's Jesus.

Death. His death, for us. Jesus' death, for our world's many dyings. Jesus' death, for our many dyings. When we follow Jesus, we share in his death and resurrection. Disciples die with him, and rise with him.

Jesus' death is extravagant, scandalous, wasteful. Because that's what love does.

Let's walk with him. And smell with him.

Amen.