“SHE HAS DONE A BEAUTIFUL THING TO ME”

Mark 14:1–11

Key Verse: 14:6

“‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’”

 In Mark's Gospel it’s Passion Week. On Sunday, though he entered Jerusalem as a humble and gentle king, coming in the name of the Lord, the religious leaders rejected Jesus. On Monday he rebuked their money-oriented way of running the temple, neglecting the Gentiles. On Tuesday they challenged his authority and tried to trap him with many tricky questions. Jesus taught that loving God and people is most important. Then he predicted that the temple would be destroyed, that his disciples would have to live in a troubled world full of persecution, but that he would come again to this world in great power and glory. We need to put our hope in his return and be spiritually alert to welcome him at any time. The event in today’s passage is on Wednesday of Passion Week. The religious leaders are plotting to kill Jesus. Judas agrees to betray him. But a woman anoints him with very expensive perfume. Jesus says that wherever the gospel is preached, what this woman did also needs to be told. It means there’s a really important lesson for everyone to learn from her. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

 Look at verses 1,2. Mark reminds us that it’s now only two days away from Passover and Festival of Unleavened Bread. At this time every year Jerusalem swelled to around five times its normal population, and the Roman governor would come down from Caesarea with additional troops. Passover was a one-day meal, and the Festival of Unleavened Bread lasted another seven days. It was the most important religious holiday, to commemorate when God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. God told them to put a lamb’s blood on their doorposts, and if they did, the angel of death would pass over their houses and spare their firstborn sons. That night the Israelites finally escaped Egypt. God wanted them to celebrate this event every year and tell their children about it, to always remember his saving grace. But the religious leaders, who should be helping their people spiritually, aren’t thinking about any of that. They’re scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. They’re worried about his popularity and feel threatened by him. It shows how dark they are.

 Then Mark makes a striking contrast. Read verse 3. As we’ve seen, Bethany was a suburb of Jerusalem just a short distance away. When he visited Jerusalem, Jesus usually would take his disciples to Bethany to spend the night. Bethany was known as a wealthy suburb. So this dinner at Simon’s house is an elaborate affair. It’s likely that Simon the Leper had been cured by Jesus, and now he invites him and his disciples to a first-class dinner. In their culture, women would attend only to serve the food. But this woman enters for an unusual reason. She’s bringing an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. The alabaster jar is expensive in and of itself, but the the perfume of pure nard is from India and is even more expensive. Later we find that that one bottle of perfume is worth a year’s wages. But this woman breaks the jar and pours out all that perfume on Jesus’ head.

 Why? She doesn’t utter a word. And the passage doesn’t explicitly say why. But her actions say everything. It’s like the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Pouring perfume on his head was a way to honor him. And the value of the perfume shows how much she valued him. To her, Jesus deserved the highest honor imaginable. Why did she think Jesus deserved that? She probably couldn’t stop thinking about all the amazing things Jesus had done. She no doubt had had a personal experience with him. She had experienced the power of his words and the depth of his love and forgiveness.

 But people there don't like it. Look at verses 4,5. Mark doesn’t say specifically who these people are. But Matthew’s Gospel tells us that it’s Jesus’ disciples saying this. John’s Gospel says it’s mainly Judas Iscariot. It’s an embarrassing moment for Jesus. He suddenly has perfumed oil dripping down his head and beard and all over his clothing. People immediately know what kind of perfume it is—probably the most expensive smell ever. At Passover it's customary for Jews to give something to the poor. But this woman, obviously a wealthy resident of Bethany, seems to ignore the needs of the poor and is engaging in extravagant waste. It’s easy to see her with critical eyes. It’s still easy for men to be harsh with women.

 What does Jesus say? Immediately he defends her strongly. Look at verse 6. He rebukes his disciples and anyone else for bothering her. And he publicly praises what she did as “a beautiful thing.” In that male-dominated world Jesus often affirmed women. Now he’s at it again. The Greek word for beautiful is “kalos,” which basically means “good.” It can also mean “noble” or “useful.” Those present are calling it a waste. They think this woman is foolish. But Jesus says what she did is beautiful, noble, useful and good. Actually this woman shows us an excellent example of what Jesus taught is most important: loving God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength (12:30).

Then Jesus addresses their seeming concern for the poor. Look at verse 7. He’s not excusing people from caring for the poor. He himself often showed how much he cared for the poor. He’d just praised the widow for putting in the offering box all she had to live on. He’d fed a crowd of 5,000 hungry and poor men, out of his great compassion. Jesus wants us to be mindful of the poor. But at this time he says, “but you will not always have me.” It’s a special occasion. In fact, in less than three days Jesus will be crucified. It’ll be the most painful time, and the greatest loss ever. Now it’s one of the last chances to do something special for him while he’s still on earth. Some people may ask, “Why should anything special ever be done for Jesus?” Revelation 5:12 explains: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Jesus, who was slain for our sins, is forever worthy to receive our greatest treasures, even our lives.

Actually, there are still occasions today when we can do something for Jesus. Every day we might be busy doing many things, but there are moments when we should stop and devote ourselves to Jesus himself. Worship services are a chance to do something for Jesus. Showing hospitality to those who belong to Jesus are another chance. Devotion to Jesus, doing things for his name’s sake, is never a waste and should always take first priority.

Jesus goes on to say how useful the woman’s act really is. Look at verse 8. This woman couldn’t do many things, but Jesus says “she did what she could.” Then he gives what she did a special meaning. No doubt this woman has no idea she's anointing Jesus’ body for burial. But Jesus says she was. He knows he'll be executed as a criminal, and as such, he won't be having the normal anointing of his body. But this woman has actually provided it. She's given him the anointing worthy of the true King and Son of God.

Finally, Jesus makes the strongest possible statement about what she did. Look at verse 9. It has an even larger significance. He says her story needs to be told wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world. Wow! Jesus wants all people everywhere, including here, today, to remember and learn from the beautiful thing this woman did for him. He's saying we all need to remember her, honor her and learn from her.

Let’s go back and read verse 6. Jesus says, “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” Some people may think that this is just a woman thing, or that it’s just a certain kind of woman who likes to do such things. But it’s definitely not just a woman thing, or just a special woman thing. Actually, every true believer has received the grace of forgiveness from Jesus. It’s something we believe by faith. But how should we respond to it? We should be thankful to Jesus. We should appreciate what he’s done for us. We should really love him. We should be giving our hearts to him. The Bible says his grace actually transforms our lives. Titus 2:14 says that Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” The word “good” is the same word “beautiful” Jesus uses here in verse 6. The Bible says over and over again that as believers in Jesus, our lives should be full of good deeds or beautiful things (e.g. Mt5:16; 1Ti5:10; Heb10:24; 1Pe2:12). 1 Timothy 6:18 says, “Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and wiling to share.” These are deeds characterized by sacrificial love, mindfulness, comfort, helpfulness and giving. Are we eager like her?

On the surface it may seem that we’re doing good for people, whether they're fellow believers or just fellow human beings. But underneath, we should be doing good as if we’re doing it for Jesus himself. The Bible says that when Jesus comes again as our King, he’ll say to those who did many beautiful deeds: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” These people will ask, “Lord, when did we do these things for you?” And he will say, “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Mt25:34–40).

People are saying about what this woman did, “Why this waste?” But Jesus says, “She has done a beautiful thing to me.” I know a number of people who've poured out the best years of their lives for ministry. They've made painful sacrifices and given their whole hearts to love and serve others, not calculating the cost. Yet the results are not what they expected. Through them people received the gospel, the life-giving word of God, much love, and help with their needs, but then left the ministry. Afterwards those serving them feel a sense of loss. But story of this woman tells us that whatever we do purely out of love for Jesus remains forever meaningful, and always remembered by God.

True Christianity is not about having knowledge or being smart; it’s about having a heart to love and serve. At the end of today’s passage, we see another contrast. Look at verse 10. Mark emphasizes that Judas was one of the Twelve—one of the closest followers of Jesus. But even such a close person went and betrayed Jesus. Mark is silent about why. But through this contrast he’s showing that Judas, unlike this woman, had no heart for Jesus. Following Jesus can never be a matter of what we know, or just being physically present; it’s always a matter of heart.

Today Jesus wants us to learn from this woman who gave her treasure to him. May God help us to deeply experience the grace of Jesus, which is the only thing that can change us to be like her. May God help our lives to be characterized by beautiful things done out of pure love for Jesus. May God give us the conviction that living like this is never a waste.