

*St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven*  
*April 6, 2025*

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." ~John 12:1-8

My focus when I first graduated from college was music. I moved to New York City for a job that paid, believe it or not, \$100 a week and I knew I'd need lots of freelance work. And so when the call came to join a singing group as accompanist on their tour of Germany, I said an enthusiastic yes. I knew going in that the trip would mostly be work, but that was OK: I'd be playing some Mozart and Grieg, two favorites. I knew I'd get to play the organ in one of Bach's churches. I knew we'd be in some very musical cities including Bayreuth, Dresden and Leipzig. What I didn't know *is that we'd be in Berlin just after the wall came down.*

Of course, I'll never forget the feeling. While some of it is a blur a few decades later, so much of the memory endures vividly and indelibly. I remember the sheer raw energy. I remember the rush of humans into areas inaccessible to them for decades. I remember the joy, the homecoming, the myriad reunions and the thrill of it all. I remember the loud, happy voices, the toasts, the cheers, the laughter, the sense almost of disbelief. I remember the hope, the feeling that change and that the good really were possible and attainable. I remember visiting the East and seeing and even entering buildings until so recently off limits. Everything breathed, everything felt so alive.

And here's what I find so interesting. I was on that trip with a lot of people, some of whom are still good friends. And when we chat or get together, the trip of course comes up, as do our vivid memories of that moment in time. *And none of us remembers it the same way.* In fact, we remember it quite differently. The energy is the same, the raw feeling, the core sensation, but the details aren't at all. If you heard us talk about it, you might wonder if we'd been on the same trip or if we'd been there at the same time. We all agree we were there for something life-changing, for a rare, maybe even unique, threshold moment. But if you heard, say, four of us talk about the places and the sounds and the vistas, the encounters and the experiences, you might think we'd been in four different times and places, on four different trips, in the midst of four different moments, no matter how much raw energy courses through each of our memories.

I tried hard to think of another moment in the gospels quite like the one we behold today and I couldn't. One for which the memories of the evangelists share such a raw, vital common energy but in which the details are so utterly different. Mark, Matthew, Luke and John all weave this raw, luminous, beautiful moment into their tellings of the gospel story, and the ecstatic heart of it is always there: a follower of Jesus performs a lavish act of devotion as Jesus reclines while sharing dinner with friends. Depending on the version, Jesus' dinner companions variously speak sharply to her in indignation as she not only upends a social gathering and all the norms attached to it,

but more pointedly while doing so, breaks open a jar of precious ointment valued at something in the neighborhood of \$90,000 and pours it lavishly over Jesus as the room fills with its fragrance.

No matter the precise details, the evangelists all make sure we hear the story of this transgressive, extravagant act and, astonishingly, each tells us very plainly of the unlikely and almost impossible denouement: Jesus silences the din of opprobrium as he not only affirms her but draws her to the very center, seeing her gift as a gesture not only generous, faithful and loving, but also prophetic. It's the first gospel that's clearest here: "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done here will also be told, in memory of her." It's impossible even to imagine the response of the room as this bold follower has shattered social norms, performed an act some might reasonably consider wasteful, engaged so physically and sensually with the person of honor, and of all things has been *commended* for it.

It's a striking moment, a rather shocking moment, and yet all four evangelists, each of whom has *so little room* for sharing the essential stories of Jesus, of healing and storytelling and teaching, of works of wonder and equipping of followers — even Mark who seems determined to race us to the cross and to the work of redemption — share it as an essential vignette, a heartbeat moment. And it's one of a very small handful. Stories told in all four gospels are few indeed: Jesus calls disciples, he's baptized in the river Jordan, he enters Jerusalem to shouts of Hosanna, he gathers with followers for a Last Supper together before he gives his life for us, and, oh yes, somewhere in all of this *a woman empties out a jar precious nard, pouring it over his body*. This moment is included among *those* essentials!

And so the question is, of course, why? Why is this among those very few vignettes all the sharers of the story of redemption know they *must* include?

I think the answer shares something in common with those memories my friends and I all share of that moment we each beheld in Berlin. The details differ, but there's no doubt that we all felt that the world, if only for a moment, *had turned upside down*.

In a way that's of course much more significant, the world, God's good creation, this realm we inhabit — all of it — had already turned upside down in Jesus. And what the evangelists know is that *it's this moment* that seals it and signifies it and captures it and makes it all so real. A follower has come from the outside and has been drawn all the way not only to the inside but to the very center. The world has turned upside down. It is she, we learn, who will be remembered. It's she who saw what was ultimately real. It's she alone, really, she alone who understood that Jesus had come to give us the gift of his life, the gift of everything, and that it was time to anoint him as king, to anoint him as high priest, to prepare him for the burial that would turn the world upside down in the most ultimate way, turning shame to honor, turning an apparent end to an ultimate beginning, turning despair to an ultimate joy, and yes, turning death to life.

And this is why we share this story on the threshold of Holy Week. Because we stand ready to be here in prayer, in presence, in music, in the word and in the story of salvation beholding together, bearing witness together, *as the world turns upside down*. As the Lord of life gets down on his knees, performing his own transgressive act that folks on the inside will also resist, pouring living water over the rough feet of those to whom the world has assigned lower status in a lavish act of love and devotion, wiping them dry, turning the world's domination system on its head. As the Lord

of love will be subject to betrayal and abandonment, to a rejection and hate that will never and can never be the last word as love wins and as its pulsating, unquenchable energy is taken to the world by another Mary along with today's Mary and yet another Mary, sharing that ineffable, unnameable and uncontainable energy that turns the world upside down still, that takes on the world's domination system still in acts of love and devotion, in acts bold and transgressive, and most of all in the gift of presence, of showing up, even if uninvited or perhaps even unwelcome, of living the one life of devotion that really matters as she did. What she has done will always be told, the evangelists tell us, all four of them, in memory of her, so that her story of devotion at its most rich and radiant and real can finally and fully become our story as well, because turning the world upside down is of course nothing more and nothing less *than turning it rightside up*.

Thanks be to God. Amen.