

March 13, Fifth Sunday in Lent: John 12:1-8

by [MaryAnn McKibben Dana](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue

Jesus' words in this week's Gospel reading have always struck me as a little strange. He tells Judas that Mary bought the perfume to keep for the day of his burial. But rather than save it for that day, she uses it when he's still alive and well.

What exactly is the rush? Mary needs to wait only a few more days to fulfill her original intention. But something in her can't wait. She anoints Jesus' feet—not for burial, but for his short, resolute walk toward death.

What do we do when time grows short?

Mary offers us an answer. Her response embodies the advice given by Annie Dillard, well known to writers everywhere: "Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place . . . give it, give it all, give it now." It's advice for life as much as for writing. This seems to be the reason for Jesus' blunt response about the poor always being with us. The point is not to be resigned and complacent; it is to be present to what each moment requires. And what this moment requires of Mary is an act of reckless beauty.

Such wholehearted vulnerability is not often our default posture. We find it hard to say (or hear) what needs to be said, sometimes waiting until it is too tragically late.

Years ago the *Atlantic* profiled Harvard University's epic longitudinal study of 268 men over the course of their lives. For one man's 70th birthday, his wife asked friends, colleagues, and loved ones to write him letters of appreciation. She bound them in a book, some 100 in all. When the researcher asked the man what was in the letters, he paused and got tears in his eyes. "I've never been able to bring myself to read them," he said. It was too much love; he couldn't bear it.

The anointing at Bethany is Mary's letter, written in the fragrance of death. Jesus reads her meaning loud and clear.

Preachers often focus on the aroma of the nard. Smells connect us with memories in ways other senses don't. The gingery spice of mom's Dutch apple pie. The warm,

herbal musk of fresh-cut grass. I once read about a fancy farm-to-table restaurant that recreated the smell of burning leaves. Many guests reportedly ate their meals while wiping away nostalgic tears.

Pure nard, of course, would not evoke warm memories for Mary and Martha's dinner guests. It would call to mind loved ones' deceased bodies, prepared for the grave. It might also bring to the disciples' minds in particular all the quotidian living and dying they've missed out on by dropping everything to follow Jesus—unlike the would-be follower who wanted to bury a family member first and catch up later. Given this emotional freight, it's understandable that Judas would react so strongly (though we're told he has ulterior motives). What's striking is that the other people in the room don't.

Judas asks why the nard wasn't sold for a pretty penny and the money given to charity. A more apt question might be why Mary didn't use it on her brother Lazarus, dead just a few days before. Lazarus isn't an actor in this story—he has no dialogue—but John tells us twice that he's there, not just in the house but at the table.

When Lazarus was raised from the dead, his body had already begun to decompose. There's no reason to believe Jesus undid this; even his own resurrected body will bear visible wounds from the cross. So at this dinner party there may be not one but two death-related smells, mingling in ways we can scarcely imagine today, with our antiseptic treatment of death and dying. In *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis paints a grisly picture of the resuscitated Lazarus, his compromised body a constant reminder of the grave whence he came. Carrie Newcomer's song "Lazarus" adds great pathos for this man who's not sure he's glad to be back: "I'm the one who owes much / But that no one will touch. / Mothers see me and cry / Dogs bare teeth as I walk by."

John's Gospel is mum on such naturalistic details. What matters is that here in chapter 12, Lazarus is not shunted off to the back room. He's at the table with Jesus—and with Judas. One can only imagine the sotto voce protestations about cleanliness.

Perhaps Lazarus's presence is what prompts Mary to anoint Jesus without delay. She has known the sting of death; her brother sits there as a living reminder. By taking action when she does—by not delaying—she transforms the smell of nard from one

of death to one of life. Mary doesn't wait until it is too late, until the proper time. She pours it out precisely at the time when people won't understand, when it will be seen as an eccentric extravagance. It is a protest against the order of things; in its own way, it's a protest against death itself.

And by wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, Mary ensures that the fragrance will linger on her own body in the days to come. This memory will cling to her when her friend is taken in the middle of the night, when he's convicted on trumped-up charges, when he pours out his life and forgiveness on the cross. Perhaps the nard will give her strength to face such things. If nothing else, it connects her to Jesus, which is no small thing.