

Sermon for Lent 5, RCL Year C

March 21, 2010

Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

St. Mary's Episcopal Church

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The Barna Group is a research organization based in Ventura, California that looks at the place of spirituality in American life and culture. Their focus is facilitating the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries. They released last week a report on how Americans view Easter, based upon a free-response telephone survey of just over 1000 people.ⁱ The results are - well, judge for yourself.

Two-thirds of Americans identify Easter as a religious celebration with some theistic element. Common answers described Easter as a Christian holiday, a celebration of God or Jesus, a celebration of Passover, a holy day, or simply a special time for church attendance. Non-religious people seems to be somewhat confused about Easter. 13% of respondents said they did not know how to describe it. 8%, that Easter means nothing to them or that they do not celebrate it. A number of other answers round out the non-religious responses: Easter is a time for family and friends, for spring break, for new beginnings, rebirth and renewal, a time to dye eggs and hide them, a time for children to have fun, a celebration of the Easter Bunny, an overly commercialized holiday, and an opportunity to enjoy food and candy.

Lest we be too judgmental, some of the religious answers show confusion, too. Small percentages of people identified Easter as about the birth of Christ, the rebirth of Jesus, the Second Coming of Jesus, or a celebration of spring or a pagan holiday. As a Christian (let alone as a Christian priest), this finding strikes me the most: a clear minority of all respondents, 42%, said that the meaning of Easter is the resurrection of Jesus, or the death and return to life of Christ. Astonishingly, only one in fifty, 2% of the people in the survey, described Easter as the most important holiday of their faith.

Mary of Bethany understood the importance of Easter.

"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."

I invite you to take a moment and recall a time you were in a place filled with a fragrant smell, a smell so good and so present and so potent that you felt bathed in it? For me, I remember the smell of freshly cut grass that greeted me when I stepped outside my brother's home my first afternoon in Florida on vacation. The smell filled me with the hopes and expectations of spring. Perhaps for some of you the last time was when you last

walked into a coffee shop and encountered the pungent bouquet of freshly brewed coffee. For others of you, perhaps it's when you walked into a bakery and were greeted with the heart-warming wafting aroma of baking bread. I wonder if, for some of you, that last time that comes to mind is in your own home, when you or a loved one were making a special meal. Perhaps some of you went back to the scents and smells of a holiday meal being prepared. Think how your kitchen became a radiant center of joy and excitement at what would be served and shared at the dinner table.

Our gospel story today has something in common with those deep experiences of promise and hope and joy that pleasing smells arose in us. Evolutionary biologists tell us that our sense of smell is the oldest of our five senses, the one that reaches most deeply into our shared biological past and our personal emotional history. Smells have the power to reach into your soul, and connect you with profound emotions. As Mary broke open the jar of nard (a rare herb that grows in the Himalayan Mountains of Asia and was traded in the Hellenistic world as a luxuryⁱⁱ), she was opening more than a perfume bottle. She was opening a sense of the beauty and goodness of the world, of the world's power to delight and enliven us. With this powerful perfume, she turns to Jesus. What does she do? She anoints his feet. More than that, she wipes his feet, covered in the fragrant perfume, with her own hair. Jesus accepts this gift from her, this strange and beautiful offering of love and affection and concern and delight. More than accepts it, really, Jesus defends what she does against Judas's accusations against Mary of waste and neglect of the poor, and Jesus makes the remarkable statement: "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."

Jesus is on the cusp of the fateful last week of his life. He knows it. On some level, Mary knows this, too. Jesus is about to enter upon the hard road that will take him to Jerusalem as a prophesied king greeted with palms and bring him into the hands of the brutal Romans as a man without rights or recourse, to be executed in one of the most brutal ways possible. This fragrant moment we hear today, this space filled with beauty and love, is an anointing for Jesus. I imagine he treasured it deeply. I imagine when he was arrested and locked up, Jesus thought back to the freedom and care he received at Mary's home in Bethany. When the foul-smells of the prison assaulted him, I imagine Jesus held onto the sweet smells of the fragrant nard that filled the house. I imagine when the Roman soldiers began to torture him with mocking and beatings, Jesus remembered Mary's gentle touch upon his feet and the feel of her hair cleansing away the dirt and grime of the road. I imagine that in his sense of his worth, and in his sense of God's profound love for him in all

circumstances, the anointing Mary of Bethany gave him held Jesus up through his Passion. The fragrant smell, and the love it carried, reached deep into his heart and soul, to a place where no one could take it from him.

Friends, I would argue, this is the deep meaning of Easter. Within each of us, there is a holy place where we know we are precious, beloved children of God. There is such love for us, that when we remember it, when we connect with it, nothing can overcome us, nothing can separate us from that love. As Paul so wonderfully put in Romans (8:38): “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” However, to live into the fullness of the love of God in Christ that we have, we must remember it deeply and fully, like those scenes in your lives connected to your remembered smells.

The Church, in her centuries-old wisdom, has set aside the services of Holy Week to help us remember the story of Jesus the Christ, who was not overcome by torture and death but who instead through torture and death conquered evil and sin that we, in him, might have joy and the fullness of life. Next Sunday we enter Holy Week through Palm Sunday, which gives you the whole parade of our Christian experience: the joy of the Liturgy of the Palms, the pain and sadness of the Passion, and our hope and sustenance in light of the Resurrection through Holy Communion. Then, April 1, 2, and 3, we celebrate the Triduum, the great three days that stand at the center of our faith and set the stage for Easter Sunday. Maundy Thursday, when we remember the Last Supper, Good Friday, when we remember the Passion, and Holy Saturday, when we mark the end of Lent and the beginning of the joy of the season Easter in the Great Vigil. If you only come on Easter morning and fail to partake more fully in the services of Holy Week, then, my friends, it will be as if you enter this holy space and only catch the fleeting waft of a wonderful fragrance that filled the room. There is power in these services; there is strength in these stories, power and strength for you in your life. For God’s desire is to be like Mary to you, to anoint with the knowledge and experience of God’s love so deep in your heart and soul that you will remember it always and nothing you face in life will overcome that love.

A living example of this is Bishop Jean Zache Duracin of the Diocese of Haiti, our sister Diocese in the Episcopal Church. Coming through the experience of the earthquake, Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts-Schori said to Bishop Duracin and the people of Haiti, “You have had your Good Friday.” In the face of such devastation, Bishop Duracin was recently asked how the people of Haiti seem to be still resilient and hopeful. He said, “Usually Haitian people are people of hope. They hope for a better future. The church has lost everything that is has; all the buildings are down. In all this, at the site of the churches, you can go every Sunday and find

many people gathered for worship. The church is there even though there are no buildings. We are there, the people are there.”

And when asked where God is in all of this, the bishop answered “I think God is there. We’ve always been taught that we live in a fragile world. Our existence is fragile; that’s why we ask God to be with us, to protect us. Even in the Lord’s Prayer we ask God to deliver us from evil – it is not that there is no evil because God is there. God is there, and that’s why I think we have hope and why I think many people are alive, because God is with us and God has his plan for us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Know, my friends, that whatever your circumstances in life were or are or will be, God is with you, and has plans for you. Make sure your plans include remembering and connecting with God. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/356-most-americans-consider-easter-a-religious-holiday-but-fewer-correctly-identify-its-meaning>

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nard_%28plant%29

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.episcopalcafe.com/lead/haiti_earthquake/bishop_jean_zache_duracin_refl.html#more