

**Sermon for Sunday, February 19, 2012**  
**Reverend Eric Stiller**  
**A Beautiful Thing**  
**Mark 14:1-11**

*Mark 14:1 Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. <sup>2</sup> “But not during the Feast,” they said, “or the people may riot.”*

*<sup>3</sup> While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.*

*<sup>4</sup> Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? <sup>5</sup> It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages<sup>[a]</sup> and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.*

*<sup>6</sup> “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. <sup>7</sup> The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. <sup>8</sup> She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. <sup>9</sup> I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”*

*<sup>10</sup> Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. <sup>11</sup> They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.*

Where do you find joy? And what price are you willing to pay for it? That is one of the central questions this passage is forcing us to wrestle with. What price are you willing to pay for the joy you seek? Because let’s face it, what we really want out of life is joy, right? We yearn for fulfillment and wellbeing. And let me say right up front that is perfectly legitimate. God created us for joy.

What is it for you? Something has your imagination. Something has your heart. There is something you think about when your mind is not otherwise engaged, something you dream about when your heart is free to wander, something you worry about if it’s in danger. And it tends to cluster around certain areas of our life: money, power, achievement, reputation, romance, family. And even if you’re a Christian, sometimes we see Jesus as a threat to these things. I know that’s strong language, but what are the things we say? “I know Jesus is supposed to be my greatest joy.” That’s the Sunday School answer. But we have to qualify it by saying “supposed to be” because we know he’s not, and we feel guilty. Or, here’s a classic thing we say: “I just need to surrender to God’s will.” Again, there’s the implication that God’s will is something difficult, arduous, even unpleasant. We feel that God’s will is often contrary to what we would choose for ourselves. And so we feel this tension between our joy and God’s will.

But if you’re not a Christian, Jesus is even more of a threat. When I was 16 years old I went to a Christian summer camp with the youth group of a local church I had been attending. And I was really wrestling with following Jesus. I felt like, “If you’re going to follow Jesus, it should be all or nothing. You shouldn’t play games with God.” That’s the way I felt. And on the last night of the camp, the main speaker said, “You should willing to go anywhere, and do anything for the Lord Jesus.” And I distinctly remember sitting there, thinking to myself: “I can’t. I won’t.” Because I felt like there were too many other things I wanted to do, and following Jesus was just too much of a threat. And so I rejected Jesus for the next 14 years.

This passage we just read forces us to ask the question: What is your greatest joy, and what price are you willing to pay to find it? Your answer depends on how you respond to Jesus' death. That's what this passage is showing us. The gospel of Mark is a short book, and one of its main features is the way it seems to hurtle forward to Jesus' death. It's filled with all these signs pointing forward, as though you were on a road and you kept seeing mile markers that said things like: "Jesus' death – 10 miles ahead;" "Jesus' death – 5 miles ahead." And then here in chapter 14 it's like you turn a corner and all of a sudden there's a huge sign in front of you that says: "Jesus' death – 100 ft. ahead." And up to this point, the focus has been on Jesus and what he's doing. But here in chapter 14, the focus shifts from Jesus to the people around him, and the way they're wrestling with this question: What is your greatest joy, and what price are you willing to pay to find it? Let's answer this question by seeing three things: The joy we seek, the joy Jesus gives, and how we can find it. First:

**The joy we seek** – The heart of this passage is the story of this woman anointing Jesus. But her story is sandwiched right in between the parallel story of how the religious leaders were looking for a way to kill Jesus, and how Judas went to them to make it happen. And Mark has written it this way on purpose in order to contrast and highlight the different ways of responding to Jesus.

Look at the first two verses. Everybody's seeking something. Verse 1 says the religious leaders "were looking (literally "seeking") for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him." Same thing with Judas. Verse 11 tells us he was watching (again, same Greek word: "seeking") for an opportunity to hand Jesus over. They were all seeking something. What is it? When Judas comes to them with his offer, it says in verse 11 that they were delighted. The word there is the Greek word for joy. They rejoiced at the prospect of Jesus' death. But let's be clear about this. The death of Jesus was not the thing they were seeking. Jesus' death was simply the means of protecting the thing they sought. What was that? Joy. Jesus was a threat to their joy.

What do we mean by that? Jesus himself tells just two chapters earlier. In Mark 12:38-40, he says "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers." Put in modern terms, they had the designer suits and the box seats at Busch stadium. They had money, power and clout, and they wanted to keep it that way. But Jesus was a threat to these things. In John 11:48, they're all talking amongst themselves, and they say, "Hey guys, if we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." They were doing some calculations here. There was a cost/benefit analysis going on. "If Jesus lives, we lose everything that makes our life meaningful." Jesus was a threat to their joy, and their response was to find a way to put him in the grave. Get rid of the threat.

Now, it would be easy to dismiss them as villains with no relevance for our lives. But to do so would be rash, for two reasons. First, they were seeking the same things we seek. Was their joy really wrapped up in fancy clothes and box seats? Those were the particulars, but the essence of what they were looking for was the same thing you and I are looking for. What did they get out of these things? Identity, meaning, significance. And we're all seeking our joy in these things. The particulars may be *money for some, romance for others, or winning or dominating in your career for yet others*, but the essence is the same. We're all seeking identity, meaning and significance. That's where our joy is.

But secondly, protecting their joy was dependent on putting Jesus in the grave. And we could condemn them for that, but consider for a moment. If you think Jesus was a great man, but only a man, then your joy is dependent not on putting him in the grave, but keeping him in the grave. Because if Jesus

was simply a great man or moral teacher, then you can admire him. You can even emulate him. But you don't have to submit to him. You don't have to obey him. But if he is the Son of God who rose from the dead, then you owe him a lot more than admiration or emulation. You owe him everything: Your life, your obedience, your submission. And that's where a lot of us need to do some serious calculations of our own. Where are you seeking your joy? Where are you seeking your identity, meaning and significance? And what would it mean for those things if Jesus is Lord, and not just a great man?

Before I became a Christian, I used to think about Jesus from time to time. And I would always console myself by saying that he no doubt believed the things he said about himself, but he was just mistaken. Sincerely mistaken, but mistaken nonetheless. It never occurred to me to consider the implications of that kind of mistake. C.S. Lewis is famous for addressing this question. In *Mere Christianity*, he lays out the options open to us: either Jesus was a Lunatic, a Liar, or Lord.

Now, there are some who object to this, saying it's a false trilemma. For instance, Austin Cline is an atheist who has written against Lewis' argument, and he says, "there are other possibilities which Lewis does not effectively eliminate. For example, perhaps Jesus was simply mistaken or that we don't have an accurate record of what he truly said — if, indeed, he even existed."

Now, if Jesus really was simply mistaken, I don't know how that's not the same thing as saying he was crazy. Because anyone who mistakenly believes that they are God incarnate, with the authority to forgive all sins, oh, and by the way, someone on whom your eternal destiny depends, anyone who mistakenly believes that is crazy, probably dangerous and should be avoided at all costs. Well, maybe Jesus never existed. That's only an option if you don't want to deal with the historical evidence. In fact, the only serious alternative is the suggestion, which most people say nowadays, that Jesus never actually said any of these things. It's all a legend. If you've taken a religious studies course at most any university in the last 50 years, that's what you've been taught. They teach that the gospels were written hundreds of years after Jesus lived, and therefore no one can really know what he said. But that teaching is now hopelessly behind the times. We don't have time to go into it this morning, but the most recent archeological evidence essentially proves that the gospels were in fact written within the lifetime of the apostles themselves. There is more evidence for the historical reliability of the New Testament than any other document of ancient times, hands down. And if you're going to be intellectually honest, you have to deal with that. You can say Jesus was just a man, but you can't say he was a great man. And if he wasn't a great man, what would it mean for your life if he really is Lord?

Kenneth Clark was a British writer, art historian, and producer of the BBC television series *Civilization*. He was also a deeply secular man and his lifestyle in many ways reflected that. But when he was working on a book in Florence, he had an encounter with God. This is how he described it:

"I had a religious experience. It took place in the church of San Lorenzo, but did not seem to be connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes my whole being was inundated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had known before. This state of mind lasted for several months, and, wonderful though it was, posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless: I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion for I was in every way unworthy of receiving such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right. I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But that I had "felt the finger of God" I am quite sure."

Where are you seeking your joy, your identity, meaning, and significance? What would it mean for your life if Jesus really is Lord? We've seen the joy we seek. Let's look next at:

**The joy Jesus gives** – Now, in radical contrast to everything we've just seen, we have this amazing woman. Instead of protecting her joy by rejecting Jesus, she's literally pouring it out on Jesus. And there are two things we need to reflect on here. First, think about what this flask might have represented to her.

We're told it was worth a year's wages. I don't know how much you make, but to me, that's a lot of money. And if her deepest joy was set on financial security, then she just poured her life savings *and* her retirement on Jesus' head. Or consider this: In those days, it was normal for a woman to have a dowry. And the bigger the dowry, the more valuable it was, and the better the chance she stood of attracting a desirable spouse. So, if her deepest joy was romance, marriage, or having a family, then she just threw away her best shot. You see, this could have represented any number of things to her, things in which you and I also find our joy: Money, romance, family, security.

But secondly, notice what she does with this flask. These alabaster flasks were little round bottles, and they had a long, slim neck with a stopper at the end. Now think with me. People back then weren't stupid, and when they made these flasks, they put the stoppers on the end so that you could use just a little bit at a time. She didn't have to break it. Even if she wanted to pour it out on Jesus, she could have just uncorked it. But she breaks it. And I don't know about you, but the only time I ever break something is by accident or by impulse. And it's clear that this is no accident. This is a picture of someone who is so caught up with the beauty, majesty, power, love and glory of who Jesus is, that in a moment of rapture she takes the one thing that was worth more than anything else in the world and she breaks it open and pours it on Jesus' head, without any calculation.

Everyone else in this story is calculating. The religious leaders are calculating how much it's going to cost them if Jesus stays alive. The other people in the room see her break this flask and the first thing they do is start calculating the cost of this thing. But the woman: No calculation. What is she doing?

She's not seeking her joy. She's sacrificing it. And that can only mean one thing: She's found a new joy, to which her all her other joys have now become subservient. She's found a new flask: Jesus.

And that doesn't mean that the flask meant nothing to her. It doesn't mean she wasn't aware of what she was sacrificing. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, then you know that following Jesus entails sacrifice. That's why it's called the cost of discipleship. Jesus was constantly telling his disciples to count the cost. In Luke 14, he says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" But he also said, in Matthew 10, that "whoever finds his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." What does that mean?

Yes, following Jesus means sacrifice. But we see it as a tension between two competing joys, which means we say things like, "I just need to surrender to God's will." We're calculating. We say, "God, I'll give you this, this, this, and this. But if I do, oh please, will you let me keep this one little thing over here?" And then we get mad when he doesn't. But that just shows that that one little thing was our real flask all along, not Jesus.

True discipleship means you've found Jesus to be your ultimate joy. And when Jesus is your ultimate joy, it doesn't mean you don't care about anything else, or that it's not a hardship to risk losing it.

But it does mean that's not the thing you're living for anymore. "Whoever finds his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." What does that mean? If you sink your joy into anything in this world, no matter how wonderful and noble it is, you will end in despair, because everything in this world is finite. It will end. Relationships end. Stock markets crash. Reputations fade. Our bodies grow old. Simone Weil once wrote that we must "recognize that all the goods of this world, past, present, or future, real or imaginary, are finite and limited and radically incapable of satisfying the desire which burns perpetually within us for an infinite and perfect good." But if you find your joy in Jesus, you will find the thing you've been looking for your whole life. Jesus doesn't want to take away your joy. He wants to be your joy. He wants to be your flask. And that brings us to our last point.

**How can we find this joy that Jesus gives?** – Notice that what this woman did caused a social uproar. People were indignant. "Why this waste?" they said. "We could have sold this for a year's wages and given the money to the poor." But what does Jesus say?

Well, notice what he doesn't say. He doesn't say, "Don't ever give money to the poor." He says, "The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me." If you think about this carefully, you realize that he's actually saying that you should give radically and generously, not just once a year but always. He's not talking about the specifics of our giving, he's talking about the heart that drives it. We're like the people in the room. We're always calculating. Our first question is, "What will this cost me?" And it's only when we have an answer to that question that we ask the next question, "Will I let Jesus be my Lord?" And Jesus is saying, "You've got the questions backwards. The first question you need to answer is not "What's it going to cost me, but Who is your Lord? What is your flask?" Because whoever your Lord is, whatever your flask is, that will determine what your life looks like.

And so these people look at the woman's action and they say, "Why this waste?" And Jesus says, "Waste? This is not a waste. This is a beautiful thing. Don't you understand what she's done? She's given us a picture of the gospel." How?

Jesus had a flask or two. He ruled on the throne of heaven. We yearn for things like power, status, security and glory. But Jesus had them all, perfectly and ultimately. And even though he had every good reason to stay where he was and keep what he had, he came to earth, he lived a life of rejection, poverty, humiliation and scorn, and finally died a criminal's death on the cross. He had the ultimate flask and he broke it and poured his life out on the cross. Not on impulse, but according to the eternal, sovereign plan of God the Father. Why? Because for all the power, significance, and glory he had in heaven, there was one thing he didn't have. Hebrews 12:2 says that Jesus endured the cross and despised its shame. Why? For the joy that was set before him. What was that? You. Me.

And the day he died, people were looking at his life and saying, "Why this waste?" All the time missing the staggering, soul-defining truth that this was the most beautiful, meaningful thing ever done. And when you see that you are Jesus' flask, and that he didn't consider dying for you to be a waste, won't that change the way you look at your flask?

What is your flask? What is the one thing that makes you feel like "My life is meaningless unless I have this," or, if you do have it, the thing you are more afraid to lose than anything else? Can you give it to Jesus? Can you give him control, to do with it what he wants? If you see him breaking his flask for you, making you his joy, then you can say to him, "Lord, I thought this thing belonged to me, but it doesn't. It belongs to you, because I belong to you.

Does Jesus ask you to surrender to his will? Yes, but even more, he asks you to surrender to his joy, so that he can turn your life into a beautiful thing.