

# MEMENTOS OF HIS PASSION



2019 Lenten Worship

*The Mementos of Christ's Passion*

Wednesdays at 7:00 p.m.

# THE ALABASTER JAR

Matthew 26:6-13

First Midweek Lent 1 - March 6, 2019

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During World War II, my father, Paul Weis, served in the Army Infantry within the European Theater: France, Germany, the Battle of the Bulge, the infamous Bridge at Remagen—made into a movie in 1969, and starring George Segal and Robert Vaughn.

As a boy, I often asked my father, “Dad, tell me a war story. Please?” And he would. Nothing gory or gruesome. Nothing glamorizing bombs, bullets, or bloodshed. Rather, stories of courage, patriotism, sacrifice, comrades-in-arms, brutally cold German winters; and the exploding shrapnel that left my father wounded and hospitalized for two months. “Dad, can I see the scar? Huh? Can I?” Yes, I pestered my father about that too.

Like many American soldiers, my father kept mementos of World War II: insignias from his infantry uniform, his service cap, his Purple Heart medal, his I.D. tags and honorable discharge papers, even a well-preserved German Luger pistol. All of these items were vivid reminders of persons, places, and events; of a world war to defeat tyranny and defend freedom.

Scripture describes another type of war, a far greater war with far greater consequences. A war first mentioned in the Garden of Eden, after the fall of Man into sin. God said: **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel,”** Genesis 3:15.

A war which Jesus Christ won for us through His atoning death on the cross. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2: **“And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”** Or in the joyful words of the hymnist: “The strife is over, the battle

done. Now is the Victor's triumph won. Now is the song of praise begun. Alleluia.," LH 210:1.

In a manner of speaking, the war Jesus won for us also has mementos; that is, items which remind us of persons, places, and events in the Passion History; and especially that which our Savior suffered and sacrificed to save us from our sins.

And so, the theme of our Lenten services this year is MEMENTOS OF CHRIST'S PASSION. These mementos are not on display in our church building. Nevertheless, they are always on display in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. And the mementos we will examine include: an alabaster jar, thirty pieces of silver, a crown of thorns, a cross, a seamless garment, a soldier's spear, a cup of blessing, a heavy stone, and finally, a burial shroud.

Tonight, we focus on the first memento; namely, an ALABASTER JAR, as described in Matthew 26:6-13. **"While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came to Him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on His head as He was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. 'Why this waste?' they asked. 'This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor.' Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to Me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have Me. When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial. I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.' "**

At first reading, this account may seem relatively unimportant compared to the other events in the Passion History: the betrayal in Gethsemane, the trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin,

and certainly the crucifixion at Golgotha.

And yet, Jesus Himself underscored the significance of this event when He said, **“I tell you the truth, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her,”** Matthew 26:13. True to the Savior’s words, we are commemorating this same woman, her alabaster jar, and the “beautiful thing” she did to Jesus, two thousand years later.

The Greek word translated as *alabaster jar* is ALABASTRON, which simply means “made of alabaster;” a beautiful stone resembling marble, easily carved and commonly used in antiquity to store precious oils, ointments, and perfumes. And while we don’t know the exact appearance of this alabaster jar—some Bible versions use terms like vial, vessel, cruse, flask, or even box—we do know its owner and its contents.

According to the parallel accounts in Mark 14:3-9 and John 12:1-8, the woman who owned the alabaster jar was none other than Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus—the same Lazarus Jesus had recently raised from the dead. Likewise, the expensive perfume in the jar was **“oil of spikenard,”** a plant which at that time grew only in India, along the banks of the Ganges River, and was therefore highly prized and highly priced.

And speaking of price, the value of the spikenard oil was three hundred denarii, the equivalent of nearly an entire year’s wages. Additionally, the disciple complaining the loudest about ‘perfume wasted on Jesus’ was Judas Iscariot who, according to John 12:6, **“did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”** Oh, how Judas

would have liked to help himself to three hundred denarii.

This is all we know about the appearance of the alabaster jar. However, more important than the jar's appearance are its lessons. What may we learn from Matthew 26:6-13; from the loving actions of Mary; and especially from these words of Jesus: **"When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial,"** Matthew 26:12? Let me suggest three lessons summarized in these three words: trust, understanding, and gratitude.

**First, trust.** The alabaster jar represents trust in the words of Jesus. How? Consider why Mary brought the alabaster jar to the home of Simon the Leper; a jar containing a pound of spikenard oil worth a year's wages. Surely, this was not the type of item Mary would treat carelessly or handle roughly or carry aimlessly through the streets of Bethany with no purpose. Did she intend the alabaster jar merely as a conversation-starter or perfume-sampler? Of course not. Mary brought the alabaster jar to Simon's house for a specific purpose; and that purpose was to anoint Jesus for His death and burial.

This fact is clearly stated in all three parallel accounts. In Matthew 26:12, **"When she poured this perfume on My body, she did it to prepare Me for burial."** Or in Mark 14:8, **"She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial."** Or in John 12:7, **"She has kept this for the day of My burial."**

Did Mary know the day of Christ's death or burial? No. Remember, Jesus was in Simon's home, not a funeral home. People were dining, conversing, asking about jobs, families, old friends, sick neighbors. According to the New Testament chronology, this dinner at Simon's house occurred on a Saturday. The next day was Palm Sunday, when thousands would line the streets to Jerusalem to wave palm branches and shout hosannas as welcome the approaching King. No sign of trouble...yet. No sign

of hardship, only kingship.

Yet, Mary still brought that alabaster jar to anoint Jesus for burial. Why? Simply because Jesus had taught that He would die—in fact, had taught that He had come to offer His life as a ransom for sinners. Jesus said it. Mary believed it. And therefore Mary acted on it regardless of the scorn, ridicule, and indignation of the disciples. Isn't what faith is? Isn't that what faith does?

None of us here tonight were with Jesus during the Passion History, were we? Yet, we know with absolute certainty that Jesus was betrayed in Gethsemane; that Jesus stood before Caiaphas, Herod, and Pilate; that Jesus hung on the cross, suffered and died for our sins, and with His dying breath cried out, "IT IS FINISHED."

We know with absolute certainty that Jesus Christ rose triumphantly from the dead on the First Easter Morning. And we know all this for the same reason that Mary knew all this. God said it. We believe it. And we rejoice in it. As Paul wrote in Romans 4:25, **"He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."**

And of such trust in God's word that alabaster jar is a memento. Our memento. Trust that disregards the circumstances and ignores the scorn and presses on, saying, "Because God said it, I believe it. I believe I'm loved, because God said so. I believe I'm forgiven, because God said so. I believe I'm eternally saved through faith in Christ, because God said so."

**Second, understanding.** The alabaster jar represents an understanding of the importance of Christ's death to God's Plan of Redemption. Again, how? Mary went to the home of Simon the Leper to anoint Jesus for His burial; not to plead, protest, or dissuade Him from dying. She accepted the necessity of Christ's death, because Jesus Himself had emphasized that necessity even

from the outset of His ministry.

Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:14-15, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”** Likewise, Jesus told the unbelieving Jews in John 8:28, **“When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the One I claim to be, and that I do nothing on My own but speak just what the Father has taught Me.”**

As the Savior’s death approached, He spoke of it more frequently and urgently. And so we read in Matthew 16:21, **“From that time on Jesus began to explain to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”** In fact, in the verses immediately preceding the account of the alabaster jar, we’re told: **“When Jesus had finished saying all these things, He said to His disciples, ‘As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’”**

Therefore, the necessity and immediacy of Christ’s death was fresh in the minds of the disciples, as they sat down to dinner in the home of Simon the Leper. And yet, it was not the twelve disciples, not Simon the Leper, not Judas the Complainer, but rather Mary of Bethany who anointed Christ’s body for burial. She understood the importance of His death.

Sadly, many churches today—at least those churches more concerned with attendance than salvation, revenue and ratings than religion—have tried to diminish the importance of Christ’s death to God’s Plan of Salvation by removing it from their sermons, creeds, hymns, and even church buildings.

Despite the massive audiences at Joel Osteen’s *Lakewood Church* in Houston, Texas—40,000 attendees over five weekly services and millions of supporters watching on TV—there is not

a single cross in Osteen's entire church complex, and relatively few mentions of the cross, if any, in Osteen's sermons. Instead, he focuses on feel-good themes, positive thinking, and material prosperity. "We don't talk about the cross," he said in one TV interview. "That's too negative."

Frankly, Mary's understanding of the necessity of Christ's death is even more remarkable, when compared to Peter's attempt to prevent the crucifixion. When Jesus spoke of the necessity of the cross, Peter took the Lord aside and rebuked Him, saying, **"Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!"** To which Jesus replied: **"Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men,"** Matthew 16:22-23. Mary did have in mind the things of God. And of this the alabaster jar is a memento.

**Third and finally, gratitude.** The alabaster jar represents humble gratitude for Christ's work of redemption, especially that which He suffered and sacrificed to save us from our sins. Yes, Mary brought an expensive gift to Jesus; something she saved for; something she planned for—an alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume.

Equally striking is the manner in which she offered Jesus her gift; not grudgingly or sparingly but completely. According to Mark 14:3, **"She broke the jar and poured the perfume on His head."** Broke it. Committed it. Gave Jesus every drop.

**"She has done a beautiful thing to Me,"** said Jesus. But what made the thing beautiful? Surely, not the cost of the perfume, but the faith, humility, and gratitude in which Mary offered it—of which the alabaster jar is a memento.

To quote the hymnist: "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a tribute far too small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all," LH 175:4