

A Beautiful Thing for Jesus

Gospel According to Mark, Chapter 14, Part I

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – March 6, 2016

Mark 14:1-42 NIV

Now the Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were scheming to arrest Jesus secretly and kill him. "But not during the festival," they said, "or the people may riot."

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of 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. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

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

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

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" So he sent two of

his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there." The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me." They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely you don't mean me?"

"It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times." But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same.

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the



A Beautiful Thing for Jesus

The Gospel According to Mark
Chapter 14 (Part I)

flesh is weak." Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

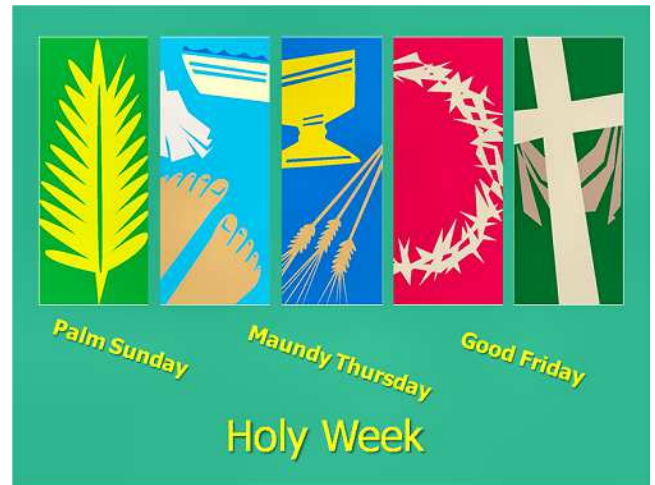
Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

As we follow Jesus through the pages of Mark's Gospel, our journey is nearing its conclusion. Today we reach the events of what we call Thursday, the fifth day of Holy Week. In English, we call the days of the week by their Germanic names, which come from the names of the pagan gods of northern Europe or ancient Rome. Wednesday, for example, is Woden's Day, while Thursday is named for the god Thor. But in Hebrew the days of the week are called by number. Sunday is *yom rishon*, "first day" or "the head day." Saturday is *shabbat*, Sabbath or the seventh day. Thursday is called *yom chamishi*, "day five." By Christians, Thursday of Holy Week is often called "Maundy Thursday." That name comes from Jesus' words at the Last Supper, when he says to his disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (John 13:34). If you pronounce the word *commandment* with a British accent — *commaundment* — you see where the name Maundy Thursday comes from. It occurs this year on March 24.

In chapter 14 we're following Mark's narrative leading up to *yom chamishi*, "day five," the day before Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday, or *God Friday* as it was originally called. Mark will tell us about the Last Supper as we proceed, but first he narrates the events of the day before, *yom ravi'i* or "day four." Jesus has been staying in Bethany, at the home of a man called Simon the Leper, where followers of Jesus have gathered for a meal. Whoever this Simon was, he obviously wasn't a leper any more, or people wouldn't have come into his house. Perhaps Jesus had healed him. But he was still called Simon the Leper because Simon was the most common man's name in Judea at the time, and to tell one Simon from another you had to add some kind of qualifier because people didn't have last names as we do today. So

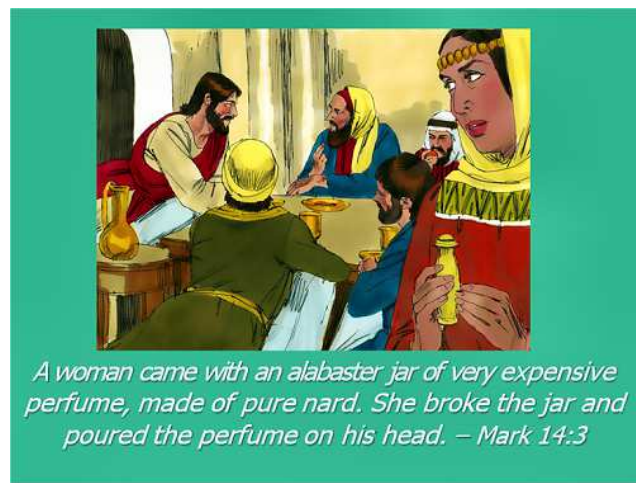
as we read the New Testament, whenever we meet someone named Simon he always has an additional description — like Simon Magus, Simon the Tanner, even Simon Peter, and so on.

Mark's account begins with the evening meal at Bethany on the day before what we call Maundy Thursday. Bear in mind that with Jews the day begins at sundown, so technically this meal occurred on what we call



Tuesday evening, and then on Wednesday Jesus gives his disciples the directions for arranging the Passover meal. But when they actually gather for the Last Supper it's after sundown again, so it has become what we call Thursday. At least that's how I make it out; the events of Holy Week are a bit complicated to fit together, and we won't go into any more detail about that.

So Jesus and his disciples are gathered at the home of Simon the Leper enjoying a meal, and a woman comes in and pours expensive ointment on Jesus' head. Her name isn't given here. John says she was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. But we're following Mark's account, so we won't explore the implications of that identification. In any case, let's set the scene. The Gospels say Jesus was positioned "at the table," but we need to understand that



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. — Mark 14:3

most homes of the ancient world didn't have chairs; people reclined or sat on the floor while eating. So when the woman poured ointment on Jesus' head, it didn't run down on his clothing as it would have if he had been sitting in a chair.

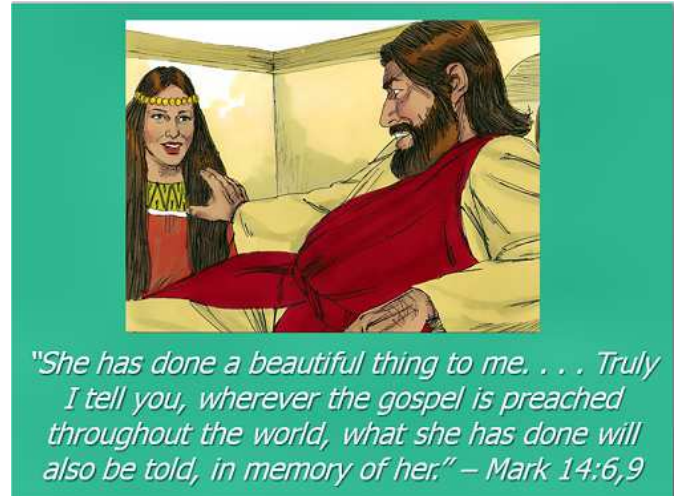
The others present complained that the expensive ointment should have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Jesus and his disciples maintained a treasury from which they often contributed to the needs of the poor, and Judas was the treasurer. John says it was Judas who objected most strenuously, and he adds, "He 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" (John 12:6). But apparently most of the disciples thought this unnamed woman's extravagant act a waste of precious resources. And you and I might feel the same way; why spend the church's limited funds on some unnecessary frill, when a better use of our offerings would be to help those of our community who are in need?

But Jesus' reply must have surprised the disciples, as it surprises us. He approves of what this woman has done. "Leave her alone," he says. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial." and then he adds, "Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, *in memory of her.*" And, indeed, this woman's extravagant act of devotion to Jesus is why we remember her today. But, Mark tells us, Judas is so incensed, not only about the woman's action but also about the fact that Jesus commends her for it, that it's this very moment he chooses to go out and betray Jesus to the religious authorities.

"She has done a beautiful thing to me," says Jesus. That remark should set us to thinking. Jesus wants beautiful things done for him — even, perhaps, extravagant or ostensibly useless things. Of course Jesus wants our obedience to his Word and our faithfulness to what he's called us to do — but he also wants us to honor him with *things of beauty*. That's why we need to consider how we can express our devotion to him through the arts: music, poetry, painting, stained glass, flowers, orderly worship, an attractive church auditorium. Those things aren't just useless frills in the eyes of the Lord. The Psalmist cries, "One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the *beauty of the LORD* and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

The music of the organ, the best of hymns and choruses that offer praise to God, fine poetry like the Psalms we recite each Sunday or poems we print on the back of our bulletin, the flowers that sometimes adorn our worship space, the colorful banners that proclaim a word or phrase of Scripture, the windows through which the light streams to add a special ambiance to our gathering place, the solemnity and ceremony of our worship, and above all the touch of a fellow worshiper's hand in greeting and the taste of bread and cup at the Lord's Table — all of these are our effort to "do a beautiful thing to Jesus." We can never write off these things as unimportant frills we can do without, for they all speak of a Creator who made this world, and all that fills it, for his glory — and called it all "very good."

We hasten on to the next section in Mark's story, the narrative of the Last Supper, when Jesus institutes that very act we just referred to, our gathering at the Table of the Lord. Jesus gives his disciples instructions for preparing the Passover meal, and note that Mark records very clearly that this took place "on the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb" (Mark 14:12). The exact order of events during this week has been a subject of investigation and debate, but Christians have always linked the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, together with his crucifixion and resurrection, with the

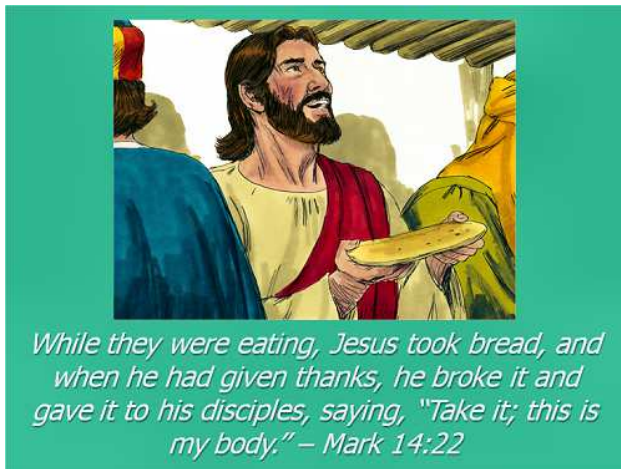


celebration of the Jewish Passover. In fact, the name for Easter in many languages is *Pascha*, which comes from the Hebrew *pesach* or "Passover." Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5, says, "Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us; therefore let us keep the feast" (5:7-8), by which he means not observing a ceremony but living the upright and sincere Christian life. Why are the events of Jesus' death and resurrection linked with the Passover? Why must these things occur at Passover time?

The answer is found in the meaning of Passover itself. The Jewish rites of Passover are a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, when the Lord delivered his people from slavery and set them on their way toward the land of promise. In the Old Testament, the Exodus is the great saving event the Hebrew writers go back to, again and again, as the evidence that God will deliver his people from their bondage to hostile powers. And that, of course, is exactly how Christians understand what Jesus accomplished for us in his death and resurrection: he delivered his people from slavery to enemies that would control us by exercising over us the power of death — the greatest enemy being, of course, the sin of unfaithfulness to God, a sin that carries within itself the seeds of eternal death. As Paul says, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23); it's the payoff for ignoring, or opposing, the way of the Lord. Jesus is our Passover, our Exodus from that horrible sentence imposed upon us by a culture hostile to the rule of God.



That evening, Jesus gathers with his disciples in the upper room that has been prepared for them. How Jesus knew that place was ready we aren't told. Perhaps he had a disciple, not one of the twelve, who lived in Jerusalem; it's been suggested this was John — not the same John the son of Zebedee but another John, maybe the one who wrote the Gospel of John. John, or *Yochanan*, was, after all, one of the most common names among Jewish men of the time. But about this we can only speculate.



While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body." — Mark 14:22

What was the purpose of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples? It was the meal during which Jesus inaugurated what we call the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, when he distributed the bread and the cup to represent his body and his blood and told the disciples to remember him whenever they did that. That wasn't part of the Passover *seder*, the traditional Jewish ceremony. It was the traditional Jewish blessing after the meal, known as the *Kiddush*, but Jesus gave it a new meaning. It would be a memorial of his death by which he has brought us into a

new covenant, or agreement, with the Lord — just as Moses, on Mount Sinai, sprinkled the blood of the covenant on the people of Israel and then proclaimed the terms of the agreement God was making with them, the Ten Commandments and all that follows in the Law.

I think it's significant that Jesus took his disciples to an *upper room* to do this, just as Moses and the elders of Israel went up the mountain to seal the covenant and take part in a sacred meal; the Book of Exodus says, "They beheld God, and they ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11). Jesus said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). When we gather about this Table as the followers of Jesus and receive the emblems of his life, the bread and the cup, we're renewing our *agreement with the Lord* to be his people; we're reaffirming the treaty he has made with us as the Great King. I taught about the meanings of the Lord's Supper several weeks ago, and I won't repeat what I said then. But I want to stress this one thing: A king doesn't make a treaty with peons. A king makes a treaty with other kings. If you're in agreement with the Lord, a treaty partner with God through his Son Jesus, then you're not a helpless peon, a nobody. If you came this morning feeling you're just an insignificant, worthless person, realize that God would not be

renewing his covenant with you unless you were a person of worth with something valuable to contribute to God's ongoing purpose in the redemption and renewal of this world he loves.

But Mark records some strange words of Jesus we don't usually repeat when we observe the Lord's Supper: "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:25). What in the world did he mean by that? I've never heard a preacher make anything out of this. Jesus seems to be saying that the time will come when he, himself, will be present and share in this holy meal with us — when God's purpose is fulfilled and his kingdom is realized here on earth, just as we pray in the Lord's Prayer.

But when we stop and think about that, we realize that Jesus is the King — he has always been, and will always be King of kings and Lord of lords — and *his kingdom is present wherever he is*. And he has promised that he will always be with us; whenever we gather in his name he's with us, and he will never forsake us. He's our host at the Lord's Table, and when we drink the cup *he drinks it with us*. Communion isn't just something *we* do to remember that Jesus died for us; it's something we do *together with him*, to reaffirm our loyalty and commitment to the Lord. Communion brings Jesus into our fellowship, and he drinks the cup anew with us each time we gather. (For further thoughts on this, read the poem on the back of your worship folder.)

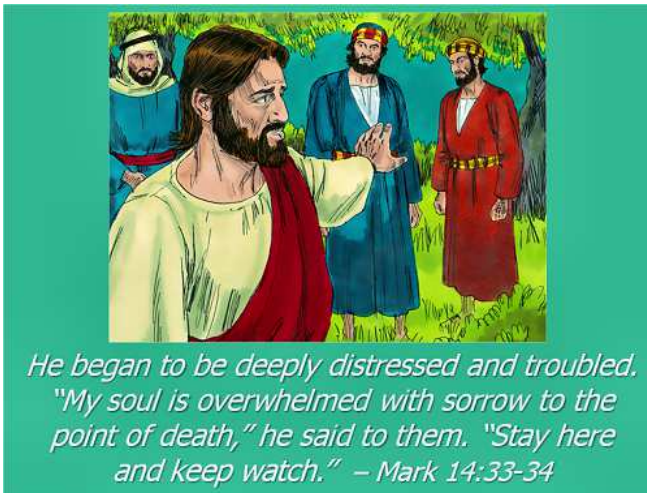
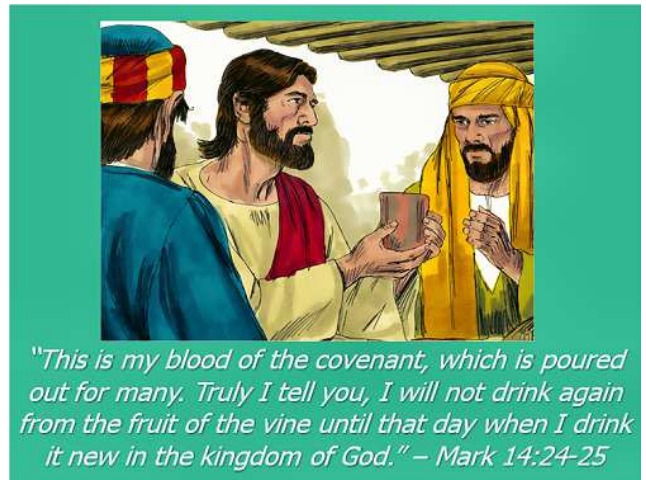
Mark carries his narrative into the Garden of Gethsemane, and tells us about Jesus' own struggle there with what's about to happen to him. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he tells his disciples, who are numbed to the point of sleep by their apprehension of impending events. Jesus falls prostrate, praying that if possible he won't have to go through with what he's facing. He knows only too well what's in store once he falls into the hands of the authorities, threatened as they are by his radical actions — especially the disturbance he created in the Temple when he cleansed it of its corruption. "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." We can never appreciate the price Jesus paid upon the cross to move the plan of God forward unless we can empathize with the agony of a flesh-and-blood man — not an unfeeling robot or a disembodied, detached spirit. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the struggle Jesus went through to endure the cross, and to stand in the resurrection: "During the days of Jesus' life

on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Hebrews 5:7).

A well-known hymn puts it this way:

*Go to dark Gethsemane,
You who feel the tempter's pow'r;
Your Redeemer's conflict see;
Watch with Him one bitter hour;
Turn not from His griefs away;
Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.*

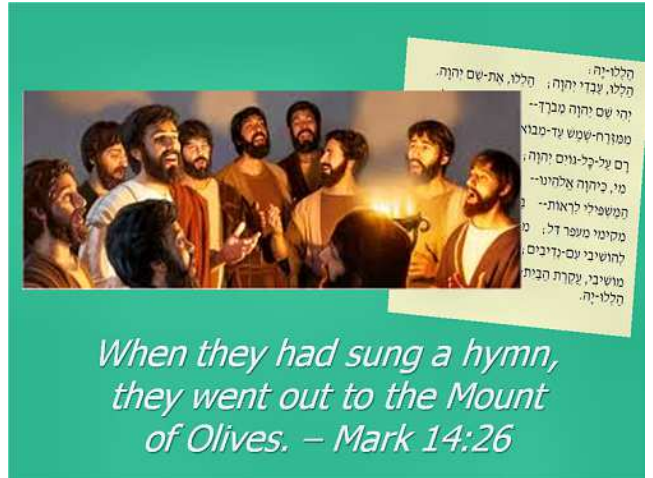
Hymns often carry us beyond ourselves into dimensions we can't reach with our ordinary faculties. Music can touch us deeply, for it operates on areas of our makeup that defy our attempts to understand it. That's why we have to pay special attention to the kinds of music we use when we gather for worship. Music and words



that are superficial or over-familiar can prevent us from experiencing the Lord at the depths in which he wants to reach us.

Jesus and his disciples had music at the Last Supper, for if we back up a few verses in Mark's account we read these words: "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Mark 14:26). Their hymn was the Hallel or "Praise," Psalms 113 through 118, traditionally sung at Passover. It begins in Psalm 113 with these words: "Praise the LORD [*Hallelujah!*]. Praise the LORD, you his servants; praise the name of the LORD. Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore. From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets, the name of the LORD is to be praised" (Psalm 113:1-3). It continues through to Psalm 118, with these words: "I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done. The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me over to death. . . . Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Psalm 118:17-18, 29).

That was the last hymn Jesus was to sing with his companions before he died on Calvary. Through it, he and his followers expressed their praise to God and their confidence that he would bring them through their trials to victory. Like the anointing at Bethany, it was *a beautiful thing for Jesus*. Let's be sure to offer him only that which is most beautiful in his sight.



*When they had sung a hymn,
they went out to the Mount
of Olives. – Mark 14:26*

Text ©2016 Richard C. Leonard
Images from Internet sources