In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning’s Gospel story is overcast with threat and danger. But there is a lovely moment in it. It is Mary’s anointing of Jesus. The words go this way:

3Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. (John 12:3, RSV)

Before I get to this happy scene, let me tell you a bit about this story’s context of threat and danger. It goes back to Caiaphas. The man was no fool — at least that was what he supposed about himself. No fool! When it came to this man Jesus, Caiaphas felt himself to be surrounded by people who just did not grasp how bad the situation was. They just did not understand the magnitude of the danger Jesus represented. So, Caiaphas sets them straight. The passage in John 11 goes this way:

47So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. 48If we let him go on thus, every one will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation.” 49But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all; 50you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” (John 11:47-50, RSV)

Caiaphas makes things clear for them. He lets them see the big picture. At least he lets them see a fairly big picture. I propose that the picture was not big enough, because it set aside God and justice. No mention of God in Caiaphas’s speech, and his words mean the death of an innocent and holy man. Still, the Council falls in line with Caiaphas. The grim words go this way:

So from that day on they took counsel how to put him to death. (John 11:53, RSV)
Jesus knows this. He knows that there are plans afoot to put him to death. And so, he does what he can to avoid this:

Jesus therefore no longer went about openly among the Jews... (John 11:54, RSV)

But this is a faint, nearly hopeless, precaution. It does not last long. Passover will soon be here, and Jesus means to openly go to Jerusalem for the great festival. He will die there, but he is determined to go anyway. This scene at the house of his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus is one of his final steps toward Jerusalem and his death.

At least he is with friends. He is with the sisters Mary and Martha and with their brother, Lazarus. Also, Jesus was with his disciples. His end is drawing near, but for this supper at least, he is with people he loves and who love him — all, except, perhaps, for Judas.

Earlier in the story, Jesus has restored Lazarus to life. That was in the chapter just before today's Gospel story — back in John 11. Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus restored his life and gave him back to his sisters. This was the miracle that so alarmed Caiaphas and the Council. People were starting to believe in this Jesus. If he could raise the dead, why not believe in him? But Caiaphas and the Council refuse to believe in him. Instead, they resolve to kill him.

That means that at this supper in Bethany, one man who has recently left the tomb is, for example, passing the bread and butter to another man on his way to the tomb. Lazarus has had experience of sickness, death, and burial. I bet he is glad to be alive again, with his sisters and friends. But as for our Jesus, he is headed toward a tomb. It will be upon him pretty soon.

Into this gloomy setting, Mary does her lovely deed. She anoints the feet of Jesus with costly ointment and dries his feet with her hair. Let me lift up a couple details about this. First, the ointment was indeed very expensive. Our text speaks of a “costly ointment of pure nard” (John 12:3). Scholars say that nard is an oil derived from the root and spike of the nard plant, and the best examples were imported from as far east as India. That was why it was so expensive. And Mary poured a pound of it on the feet of Jesus. That is a huge amount of perfume. No wonder the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment (John 12:3). Judas complains that this amount of ointment could have been sold for three hundred denarii. Well, a denarius was a working man’s wage for the day. If this ointment could have been sold for three

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1 A nice point made by Richard A. Burridge in his commentary on this passage: The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001)
2 Ibid.
hundred denarii, then it represents a whole year of wages. Marylavishes all this ointment on Jesus.

Further, note this: She pours the ointment upon the feet of Jesus, not upon his head. Anointing the head would have been the usual festive thing to do, but Mary anoints his feet. That is the procedure for anointing a dead body. It will not be long before the feet of Jesus will be anointed again by Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, when they take the body of Jesus down from the cross and prepare it for burial (John 19:38-39).

Mary seems to sense these things. She seems to understand that the Jesus she loves is not long for this world. And she grieves. She lets her hair down, which is what women did back then to express their grief, as if they were too occupied by sorrow to attend to their hair. She dried the feet of Jesus with her hair.

Judas protests about all these things, but Jesus defends Mary. He recognizes that in anointing him, she is midstream in deeds of love and grief. He will not have her interrupted. Mary seems to know that Jesus is soon to die, and she salutes him with tears, with her hair, and with the ointment. She lets the house be filled with fragrance. She brings what beauty she can to Jesus, while she still has him.

You and I have him! Many of us have walked with Jesus for a long time now, some of us going back to childhood. Let me suggest to us — both to you and to myself — that Mary’s expressions of love for Jesus are right for us too. We are being blessed by Jesus too, both right now and in eternity. We have very good reasons for loving Jesus. Consider our old faith: Jesus died that you and I might have a chance for heaven. He defended us from the cruel plans of sin, death, the devil, fate, and randomness — all of whom desire that our lives should amount to nothing. He defended us from that — that our lives should not count. He has taught us good ways to live in this world. He has taught us about gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and courage. He has spared us from dangers day by day — dangers both known and unknown. He has promised that all things shall work together for our good (Romans 8:28), and he shall make it so. We shall understand the deepest puzzles and sorrows by and by. He has heard our prayers and taken them into account. He has heard our prayers even if no one else in the world felt we were worth listening too. He has given us hope of seeing our loved ones again. Science is wonderful, and I have always loved it. But science cannot let me see my father and mother again or many, many people I am eager to meet. Many of us can sing that great hymn, “Lord, Thee I Love With All My Heart” (LBW 325) — and we can sing it truly, perhaps even with tears in our eyes. We know that we have reason to show love for Jesus. We have strong reasons, as Mary did long ago.

Especially I am thinking of this business of the ointment Mary lavished on Jesus and its fragrance. St. Paul spoke about that too. In his Second Letter to
the Corinthians, the apostle speaks of a fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus Christ:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. (2 Corinthians 2:14, NRSV)

There is similar language in our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus speaks of salt and light. We repeat these things at every baptism:

You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world. (Matthew 5:13-14, RSV)

These lovely ideas of fragrance, salt, and light mean that we who bear the name of Christ should be a blessing to our world. Christians should make this world a better place. Those who have given their hearts and their lives to Jesus should bring a kind of sweetness to this world, as Mary’s fragrance filled the house so long ago. When a Christian comes on the scene, people should sigh with relief, thinking to themselves, “Here is someone I trust. Here is someone who will listen, who is kind and honest and a good neighbor. I think it has something to do with the Jesus this person loves. This person brings goodness to the neighborhood. This person brings a kind of loveliness, of perfume and light.”

That’s what the world should be thinking about us — about us who bear the name of Christ and who enjoy his friendship. Mary of old knew enough about Jesus to express love for him, thereby making the whole house sweeter. We serve Jesus by serving the world he came to save. We love Jesus by loving one another—loving even the most unlikely of people. By bringing some salt, light, and sweetness to our world, we salute Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.