In remembrance of me. That’s the phrase carved on Communion tables all over Christendom. Jesus said to eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of him. But in our Gospel story today we have a different pronoun: In remembrance of … HER. Jesus says: Wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.

Wow, now, there’s a woman whose name is forever inscribed in the hall of fame of faith. Oh, wait … We don’t know her name. We don’t even know why we don’t, but we do know that what she did is why we should.

Today is Palm Sunday. Last night was the first night of Passover, so our timing is perfect. Passover—also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread—was one of three major pilgrimage festivals that brought people from all around to crowd the streets of Jerusalem. It is the Jewish freedom festival, the spiritual equivalent of our secular Independence Day. It recalls God’s deliverance of the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. The Romans understood that it was a time ripe for a revolt against them as occupiers of the Jewish homeland. They sent extra troops into Jerusalem every year to keep the peace.

Jewish leaders also wanted to keep the peace. They had an arrangement with Rome that protected the people and their religious observances, even though they didn’t like it. Betraying Jesus to the Romans as an insurrectionist was pragmatic politics: it would keep the status quo and avoid unnecessary bloodshed. One man for the many. A sacrificial lamb, don’t you know?! Just like one that would be slaughtered and eaten on the first night of Passover.

The irony is thick. The tension is building.

Jesus is close by, in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper. Even a leper has a name in Mark’s Gospel, as do most male characters. Not the women. Not even this woman we are supposed to remember every time the gospel is preached.
Some things never change. Here we are 2,000 years after what Jesus said about this woman being remembered every time the gospel is preached, and we still can’t get our churches to call women to preach the gospel! Time after time we hear even our progressive Baptist churches say they believe women may preach but their church isn’t ready. Ready? Really?

Culture is like crabgrass; it’s dug in deep and hard to get out by the roots. Assumptions about male privilege are deep-rooted in Christian culture, but it’s high time the Christian part roots out the patriarchal part of church culture. This is not social tinkering we can take or leave as Christians. This is directly linked to the gospel as Jesus tells us right here in this story. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, what SHE has done will be told in remembrance of her.

So, what did she do to receive this blessing that we would rather ignore than honor? She understood the gospel, that’s what. She recognized the meaning of Jesus’ life and work that so many were missing then and still are today. Which is this:

You have to die to live.

This is why she anoints his head with oil, and presumably pours it on thick. In other similar stories, women anointed Jesus’ feet. But here we hear from Jesus that she has symbolically prepared his body for burial. Anointing the head was something a prophet would do for a king. But she gets the irony where no one else does: this king will die to save his people.

While Jesus was at the table in Simon the leper’s house, this woman, whoever she was, broke open an alabaster jar of ointment and poured it out on his head. This ointment was from spikenard in the Himalayan region of modern-day Tibet or Nepal. It would have cost about a year’s wages in Jesus’ time. Which tells us this woman was probably wealthy. That accounts for the scolding she received from others who were there, presumably men. The nard could have been sold to take care of the poor, they say. And that’s true. But what she did was priceless. It came from seeing what everyone else was missing—except Jesus and her.

We know from Mark’s setup to this story that the religious
leaders are plotting to have Jesus arrested and killed. The disciples no doubt held out hope that things could still be salvaged. Jesus would prevail. But this woman knows in her heart what love knows: love is the most threatening thing in the world, because love is what holds the world together. Everything else tries to unseat love, because love requires you to give up yourself in the interest of others. It calls on you to go to any length—even to the cross—to save your neighbor. And we would rather go to any length—even putting our neighbor on a cross or on a lynching tree or in substandard housing, jobs, schools or jails—in order to save ourselves or preserve our privilege.

Look at what’s happened in our country the past two weeks. Two more weeks, two more mass shootings. The first in the Atlanta area is a man who can’t control his own sexual temptation, and so he goes out and buys a 9mm handgun and later that same day kills the women he considered objects of his desires. You can’t even register to vote in Georgia the same day as an election, but you can buy a handgun and take eight lives that same day. And then another man buys an AR15, a semiautomatic rifle, and just six days later kills 10 people in Boulder, Colorado grocery store. By the way, in 2018 Boulder had passed a law banning the sale of assault rifles, but the NRA sued, and a judge overturned the law just 10 days before he bought the weapon.

We don’t know his motive yet, but it appears he was a more left-leaning ideologue than the right-leaning Atlanta killer. Which only reinforces the point that our problems are about right and wrong more than right and left. When we would rather protect ourselves at the expense of the lives of others, we don’t get the gospel that is summed up in our Lenten theme this year, Dying to Live.

The unnamed woman does get it. When she pours out the nard, she is pouring out herself. She doesn’t dab it or drip it. Love pours itself out. Like a Savior who pours out his life on the cross. This kind of love saves, and it holds the world together.

One of Pope Francis’ favorite images about the unity of the church and the world is a polyhedron. That is, it isn’t a sphere, like a smooth, round ball. It has many facets, like a soccer
ball with raised sections, connected underneath by an unseen substance. The pope likes to say that what connects us are small acts of kindness, gestures of love, little ways of honoring our neighbors and sticking by them as if our life too depends upon it.

One of our Wilshire members, Lindsay Bruehl, is a seminary student at Perkins. She preached on this text for a preaching class, and then she preached it again for the church our former pastoral resident, Jakob Topper, in Norman, Oklahoma, pastors. Lindsay saw another woman in this unnamed woman, a woman who was also almost lost to history, overshadowed by the man in her story. But when Lin-Manuel Miranda decided to tell the story of Alexander Hamilton in his astonishing musical, it was his wife Eliza who shined brightest. The musical was named Hamilton; and now we understand that we can’t understand his story without understanding her story, just as Jesus told us that we can’t understand his story without understanding her story—that is, the meaning of what the unnamed woman did that day in Bethany.

Eliza lived fifty years longer than her ill-fated husband, Alexander. She dedicated her life to telling his story, finishing his work, honoring him with her own work. One way she did that was to remember his own painful story of being orphaned. So, she started an orphanage that continues to this day. When she died, *The New York Times* wrote of her: *To a mind most richly cultivated, she added tenderest religious devotion and a warm sympathy for the distressed.*

In other words, she understood the gospel. That it’s about pouring out your life for others. That small acts of kindness hold the world together. That love means dying to self so that others might live.

We will never know the name of the woman in Bethany whom we are supposed to remember. But we can all remember her by doing what she did.

Look first at the people in your life. Find the most vulnerable, the neediest, the child with learning challenges, the elderly parent with declining health, the teenager having trouble finding a place in the social network. Break open the alabaster jar. Pour out the love. Remember
what she did.

Then look for ways to care for people the world too easily overlooks or casts aside. This week I had a call from a couple who follow our church but are not members. They received their stimulus check from the government and wanted to know if I knew of someone in particular who really needed it more than they. I did, of course. Break open the alabaster jar. Pour out the love. Remember what she did.

We will never know the name of the woman we are supposed to remember, but every time we hear or see the good news proclaimed in word or deed by someone whose name we do know, we recognize and honor her memory again and again and again. Amen.