



IS FOR
Alabaster

52 REFLECTIONS

ON THE STORIES

OF SCRIPTURE

Anna Carter Florence

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“Every time people tell me they have decided to read the Bible straight through I put them on my prayer list, pretty sure their galoshes will fill with sand before they get halfway through the book of Joshua. Here, at last, is a better idea: enter the Bible through any of the fifty-two doors in this new abecedary by Anna Carter Florence, who will show you how much there is to gain from starting small and staying put with a few verses for a while. Whether her topic is an ax, a yak, or the queen of Sheba, she can sound as surprised as her reader to find how much is left to discover in a book we thought we already knew.”

—**BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR**, author of *Always a Guest*
and *An Altar in the World*

“Anna Carter Florence has done it again—taken stories from the book that we love and breathed fresh wind into them and some of their lesser-known characters, objects, and even animals! As with much of Florence’s writing, we fall in love. We fall in love with language, with biblical history, with imagination and wonder, and with the God who loves and delights in us. Florence takes the best stories and gives us her best stories. What a delightful gift for us that she continues to write.”

—**ADRIENE THORNE**, Senior Minister,
The Riverside Church in the City of New York

“In *A Is for Alabaster*, Anna Carter Florence does what artists have always done: shows us how the art of language, story, character, plot, poetry, and shock can hold a mirror to the face of the reader and invite responses as strange and wondrous as the art. In response to a sculpture, Rilke said, ‘You must change your life.’ In response to the art of Scripture, Florence is a guide. She doesn’t present these texts as safe—they’re not—rather she praises their power.”

—**PÁDRAIG Ó TUAMA**, author of *In the Shelter*

“I can think of no other person, scholar, teacher, or preacher whom I’d want to take me on a journey through the ABCs of Scripture. Anna Carter Florence is one of a kind! Her homiletical imagination will set you free. Read her words, and you will fall in love with the incarnate Word all over again.”

—**LUKE A. POWERY**, Dean of the Chapel, Duke University,
and Professor of Homiletics, Duke Divinity School

“In this intriguing collection, it is fun to wander through the alphabet (twice!) with Anna Carter Florence. Her inventory from A to Z includes some old reliables, some fresh entries, and more than a few surprises. She brings to the interpretative task a rich background of study and the alert eye of a preacher. This rich recital of biblical data from A to Z is bound to illumine the reader and trigger many new insights into the text. It is a welcome, refreshing read.”

—**WALTER BRUEGGEMANN**, William Marcellus McPheeters
Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary

“Whether you have been engaged in study of the Bible for a lifetime, are just beginning, or are anywhere in between, Anna Carter Florence’s *A Is for Alabaster* will captivate you and create in you an insatiable desire for the Word. Her perspective of the ancient text makes it come alive and speak to its reader in fresh, powerful, and yet practical ways. This book will bless your life.”

—**CYNTHIA L. HALE**, Senior Pastor, Ray of Hope
Christian Church, Atlanta, Georgia

“With witticism and her signature wonder, Anna Carter Florence takes us on an alphabetical journey that will ignite inspiration and imagination in all who need and want to trust the Bible’s truths. You will fall in love with Scripture all over again in ways you never imagined.”

—**KAROLINE M. LEWIS**, Professor and the Marbury E.
Anderson Chair of Biblical Preaching, Luther Seminary

“Everybody knows Anna Carter Florence, preacher and teacher of preachers, beloved for her creative, faithful, wise, and witty biblical interpretation. What a gift she has given us in *A Is for Alabaster*. Romping from Abigail to Zacchaeus, Anna offers a lively, often very funny, constantly insightful abecedary. What’s an “abecedary”? In Anna Carter Florence’s rendering, it’s a playful but deeply theological celebration of the riches of Scripture, Old Testament and New. For us preachers, for those who love the Bible, for those who can’t figure out how to read the Bible, but especially for those who may have fallen out of love with the Bible, what a gift!”

—**WILL WILLIMON**, Professor of the Practice of Christian Ministry,
Duke Divinity School, and author of *God Turned toward Us*

“Whenever Anna Carter Florence and passages of Scripture are brought in close range, electricity arcs from one to the other, bringing insight and creativity. In these captivating and refreshing essays on biblical stories, she goes through the alphabet, A to Z, for the Old Testament and then again for the New Testament, and when she is finished, we are left both delighted and wishing that there were even more letters in the alphabet.”

—**THOMAS G. LONG**, Bandy Professor Emeritus
of Preaching, Candler School of Theology

“I binged Anna Carter Florence’s *A Is for Alabaster*. I told myself, “I have time for only one chapter,” and then read five. I said, “I’ll read a couple before falling asleep,” and then read ten. I felt angry for Lot’s wife, heartbroken for Naomi, and surprised by the queen of Sheba. I made plans to preach on Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, and Onesiphorus. I was challenged by Quirinius and Rhoda. Readers will do more than enjoy Florence’s imaginative retelling of Scripture. They will learn to read Scripture more joyfully. Florence makes the reader enthusiastic about the questions as she explores the world of Scripture with the thoughtfulness of a scholar and the creativity of a poet!!”

—**BRETT YOUNGER**, Senior Minister,
Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York

“In characteristic brisk and winsome style, Anna Carter Florence playfully explores the nether regions of the Bible, highlighting the forgotten (Puah, anybody?) centering the neglected (queen of Sheba), and relishing the obscure (Vashti). The result is like an offertory profession, bringing to the Lord’s Table the full panoply of characters from the vast storehouse of Scripture. Florence embodies the householder in Jesus’ parable who brings out of her treasure something old and something new: a chocolate box of delight.”

—**SAM WELLS**, Vicar, St Martin in the Fields, London

“To preach Scripture, you have to love it, ingest it, digest it, and let it inhabit you. Only then can black-and-white print emerge as Technicolor in the retelling. No one does this better than Anna Carter Florence. She lets the texts deliver theology rather than theology usurp the text.”

—**JOHN L. BELL**, The Iona Community, Scotland

*For David Carter Florence,
who fills my days with joy*

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Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in the making. The idea for it has been traveling with me since the day I read my parents' copy of Frederick Buechner's *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* and was captivated by the writing as well as the book's A-to-Z structure.¹ I loved the freedom Buechner took to imagine these biblical characters. The writing was a marvel, as Buechner's always was. Someday, I thought, I'd like to do an ABC book like that—and so my first thanks must go to him, for the inspiration and example he set for me long ago. Frederick Buechner died on August 15, 2022, when I was in the last stages of writing this book. Like so many others, I am deeply grateful for the gift his life and work have been.

My next set of thanks goes to my students at Columbia Theological Seminary and to all the other students and preachers I've been privileged to meet and learn from over the years. This book was originally conceived as an alphabet for preachers—that is, reflections on the preaching life, drawn from biblical stories and images. It has evolved into something broader, with a wider audience in mind. I hope the book will be a welcoming one for any reader who picks it up. I also hope preachers will still hear a word in it for them, since echoes of the book's first focus (and my day job) may reverberate, from time to time.

1. The three books in Frederick Buechner's lexical trilogy are *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (1973), *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (1979), and *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (1988).

I am grateful to my colleagues at Columbia, particularly Jacob D. Myers, my partner in all things homiletical. Jake offered encouragement at key moments, and it always helped. The Columbia Board approved my sabbatical leave, giving me time to write; President Victor Aloyo Jr. and Dean Christine Roy Yoder (and President Leanne Van Dyk and Dean Love Sechrest, before them) offered their generous support as well. Being part of the Columbia faculty and community for twenty-five years has been one of the great joys and privileges of my life, and I am thankful.

A vast network of friends and editors has sustained me through this project. Jessica Miller Kelley, my wonderful editor at Westminster John Knox Press, shepherded me through the final months and across a holiday finish line; David Maxwell, her predecessor, guided me through the proposal and early stages. My deep thanks to both, for believing in this book. Kathleen O'Connor, Geraldine Herbert, Karen Miller, Kim Long, Martha Moore-Keish, Karoline Lewis, Anna Stenund, Tina Johansson, Johan Svedberg, Carina Sundberg, and Christine Smith offered wisdom and encouragement along the way. My home congregation, Black Mountain Presbyterian Church, prayed for me and my writing every day during this last sabbatical, as did the Reverend Mary Katherine Robinson, our grace-filled pastor. I am so thankful for their love and support. And for friendship and constancy over many years and miles—not to mention the writing retreats in northern Iceland, and the weekly phone calls from Kópavogur—I thank Arnfriður Guðmundsdóttir, my sister of the heart. Someday we'll write a book together, and I'll learn to speak Icelandic.

And finally, for my beloved family, I don't have words big enough or deep enough to express the thanks and love I feel. I will simply record their names in my book of life: Gracie and Bill Florence, Lissy and Tim Rooney, Chris and Mary Carter, Caleb Florence, Jonah Florence, Kyra Harney, Jill Carter, and David Carter Florence. I thank my sister, Lissy, for her boundless love and brilliant travel companionship. I thank our sons, Caleb and Jonah, for being such an inspiration to their parents. I thank my mother, Jill Carter, for the hours and hours she spent with me on this project, patiently reading each new draft with her exquisite eye and ear for detail; her

editing and enthusiasm have meant the world to me. And I thank my husband, David, for loving me through and cheering me on, and for years of careful listening to these biblical texts with me. His wisdom and insights always make mine better, and this book is the best example of that. For his joyful spirit, and the treasure he is in my life, I dedicate the book to him.

Introduction

I fell in love with Scripture the year I became a Sunday school dropout. It was the winter I was nine years old, and the saintly Mr. Moore was our fourth-grade Sunday school teacher. For the first time, we were actually reading from the Bible—a sturdy Revised Standard Version edition that had been presented to us at the end of third grade, with our names inscribed on the cover page—and it had been exciting to graduate from the glossy illustrated children’s Bibles to this grown-up one with no pictures at all. Since September, we fourth-graders had dutifully sat around the long rectangular table with Mr. Moore at the head, while he led us in reading aloud from various passages. But it wasn’t very interesting, and in my opinion we hadn’t learned much at all beyond basic navigation around the Bible and how to pronounce some of the names.

I could tell Mr. Moore was deeply moved by the Scripture passages we read. His face lit up; this book was *alive* for him. But it wasn’t for me, and I was frustrated. What, I wondered, was the trouble? Wasn’t this supposed to be the year I was initiated into the mysteries of whatever these ancient words were saying? Wasn’t I supposed to be as enthralled by them as the adults were? Why was fourth-grade Sunday school turning out to be so boring, and the Bible such a dull book to read?

After three months, I told my parents I’d had enough of the Bible and Sunday school, and I wasn’t going back. It was the first time a book had ever disappointed me. It was the first time I’d ever rebelled,

too, and my parents listened thoughtfully to my youthful indignation. “All right,” they said. “Come up with an alternative for what you’ll do with that hour, make a proposal, and we’ll talk.”

I did some fast thinking. My grandparents, savvy educators, had recently sent three gifts: the original cast recordings of *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and a book called *The Story Bible*, by Pearl S. Buck. The records, I’d already devoured, as they knew I would. The book, I had yet to read. So I proposed to read it each Sunday morning while the rest of my family was in Sunday school.

My parents agreed. And that’s how I came to fall in love with Scripture as a nine-year-old religious rebel. Sunday mornings, when the other fourth-graders went obediently to class, I stayed behind in our parked car, under piles of blankets (New England winters are cold), reading *The Story Bible*, cover to cover. Each chapter had me riveted. No more dead words I couldn’t pronounce. No more boring recitations. *The Story Bible* was just that—the Bible told as a longer narrative made up of dozens of smaller stories, each as thrilling as the other myths and folktales I adored: Aesop’s fables and Grimm’s fairy tales; Anansi and Coyote; and *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths*, which I’d borrowed from the school library so many times that they finally gave me a copy.

Scripture came alive for me that winter. The stories leaped from the page with surprising energy, and I couldn’t wait to follow: where would this one land today?! Where would that one lead?! The Bible was turning out to be the *least* dull book I’d ever read. And if I hadn’t learned that in Mr. Moore’s Sunday school class, I’d seen it in his face—for him, Scripture was a living story. *His* story. *My* story. I just needed to hear it in a form I recognized, with the freedom to imagine in my own voice.

Many decades later, I still find this to be true. Scripture speaks to me best when I give it more room—and give myself more room, too, to read with space and time and freedom. Sometimes that means leaving the structures of a particular classroom. Sometimes that means reading in unexpected and unusual places. Sometimes that means reading Bible stories alongside other stories and myths I love, so I remember Scripture is supposed to be (and is!) every bit as exciting. And sometimes that means reading like a nine-year-old Sunday

school dropout who has had enough of *dead* and *boring* and knows that *a living story* is possible.

I hope that's some of what this book might be for you: a glimpse of how reading the Bible *could* be, and how *we* could be, with a little more room and freedom. The fifty-two reflections you'll find here—two for each letter of the English alphabet—are invitations for *you* to reflect and add your voice to this conversation. They aren't finished pieces. They won't provide definitive answers. But they might be starting points or trailheads or doorways to a place you've been wanting to explore.

The particular form the book takes is called an *abecedary*. An abecedary is a teaching tool: the alphabet written out as a primer, with each letter marking the beginning of a word or phrase. Students practiced their letters this way, as abecedaries in Middle English and Latin attest, and examples from the ancient world exist too. Hebrew abecedaries dating from 800 BCE and Ugaritic abecedaries from the thirteenth century BCE, carved in stone, were how scribes practiced their letter writing forms.¹ The book of Lamentations is an abecedary of sorts—an acrostic poem, each stanza beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

Frederick Buechner's lexical trilogy—*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* (1973), *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (1979), and *Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary* (1988)—makes use of the abecedary form, and so does this book, which was inspired by Buechner. Part of the enjoyment of writing it was picking the characters and images for each letter of the alphabet, but with only two rounds of A to Z to work with (and way too many characters whose names begin with *J*), I had to get creative to make room for everyone. Jacob, for instance, finds his place with "I is for Israel." Jonah takes "F is for Fish." Job is "W is for Whirlwind." And Jesus had to go rogue with a few incarnational verbs, like "G is for Growing Up" and

1. I thank my friend F. W. "Chip" Dobbs-Allsopp, professor of Old Testament and James Lenox Librarian at Princeton Theological Seminary, for these and other fun facts about ancient abecedaries, from his extensive knowledge of biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature and poetry. His latest book, *On Biblical Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), has been hailed as a seminal work in the field and the best of its kind in a generation.

“W is for Walking on Water,” although he did claim the privilege of wandering in and out of everyone else’s letters.

It has been a great adventure for me to commit to following these fifty-two stories up and down, around and about, and every other which way (since it would appear we never *did* take a direct route to wherever it was we were going). And reading Scripture is like that. It’s more about the journey than the destination. Whether you’re new to biblical literature or well seasoned and experienced in this regard, I hope you’ll find encouragement here for your own reading journey—and even inspiration and a fresh take on some familiar stories, A to Z, if that’s what you’re looking for.

I believe this with all my heart: God is everywhere in the stories of Scripture, alive and moving in each one. And what if a way into these ancient mysteries was already ours to imagine?

It might be simpler and closer to home than we think.

Old Testament

A

IS FOR

ABIGAIL

1 Samuel 25

Then Abigail hurried and took two hundred loaves, two skins of wine, five sheep ready dressed, five measures of parched grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs. She loaded them on donkeys and said to her young men, “Go on ahead of me; I am coming after you.” But she did not tell her husband Nabal. As she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, David and his men came down toward her, and she met them.

1 Sam. 25:18–20

*A*bigail must have known she wouldn’t have an easy time of it when she married Nabal. The man’s name means “Fool,” and he was one. He was also rich and powerful and mean, with a surly disposition and a taste for raucous feasting and insulting other men. Nabal wasn’t inclined to be generous or to give an inch of ground; when confronted, he was so ill-natured that no one could reason with him. Abigail, on the other hand, was the opposite of her husband. She was as clever and beautiful as he was stupid and loathsome. She knew how to work around him and, when necessary, clean up after him—skills she’d had plenty of chance to practice, as the wife of such a person.

It would be nice to report that Abigail’s dreary life began to change the day her ogre of a husband was magically transformed into kindly Shrek with a heart of gold, but that’s not quite how it went. Abigail’s life began to change the day she learned that four hundred armed men were on the road to her house because her fool of a husband had just offended the biggest war hero in Israel.

The armed men were with David—the future King David—who was living through a rough patch, having recently been banished from court. David was the Lord’s anointed, and King Saul had once embraced him like a son (see “G is for Goliath”). But Saul was unstable, plagued by jealousy and paranoia; his love for David turned to delusional accusations of treachery. For years, he’d been hunting David like a man possessed. David had fled to the wilderness and was living as an outlaw while he waited for the king’s foul-weather mood to lift. His men were a band of merry misfits he’d attracted along the way (“Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him” is how 1 Sam. 22:2 sums them up). As captain of this outfit, David wasn’t exactly Robin Hood; he and his gang were running a protection racket among the local herdsman. But his storied reputation preceded him, and people knew who he was. Abigail knew who he was. Her foolish husband, not so much.

It was shearing time, and Nabal had gone up to shear his three thousand sheep and one thousand goats. David heard of it and sensed that the rich man’s herds might be his next business opportunity. He sent his men to position themselves as a wall around Nabal’s flocks, shielding them from thieves while the shepherds worked. They hadn’t been hired to provide this protection, but that was the racket: to show up and be a conspicuous presence, as courteous as they were intimidating to all concerned.

When the shearing was done, David’s men went to Nabal and, in David’s name, politely asked for payment: whatever food Nabal could spare for services rendered. It was generally understood that this request was more of a demand, and the herdsman would do well to cooperate. Nabal sneered in their faces. “Who is David?” he mocked. “Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I have butchered for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where?” (vv. 10b–11).

David was furious. He immediately gave orders to four hundred of his men to strap on their swords and march with him to Nabal’s house, to avenge the dishonor and disrespect the fool had shown. Why, he’d done this man a service, and Nabal had returned evil for good! David swore he’d make him pay in blood: “God do so to David

and more also if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him” is how the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition of the Bible reads, but what he really said was much cruder (see the footnote, if you want to know).¹

David’s temper was primed to explode. He may have shown restraint where King Saul was concerned—and had only just done so, in the chapter prior to this one, by refusing to kill Saul when he’d had the opening. But not with Nabal. The fool would get the full treatment, a battleground slaughter in his own backyard.

It might have come to that if Abigail hadn’t intervened. One of Nabal’s young men brought her the news of what her husband had done and what David was planning to do in return. With her entire household on the brink of disaster, Abigail didn’t even bother trying to talk with Nabal. She left him to his cups and his table debauchery, and swiftly packed up all the food that should have been given to David’s men in the first place. Then she loaded it all on donkeys, sent the gifts of food ahead, and followed on her own mount, to meet David and his men.

She had a plan, a speech, all ready. Abigail was a match for any war hero when it came to practical tactical brilliance.² She knew what was required when a man’s ego and honor were injured, what to say to de-escalate tension and shift the focus away from the offender. She knew how to appease wounded pride, repair a chipped self-image, and appeal to a man’s higher sense of self. And she knew that calling forth generosity, gratitude, and empathy were key to restoring honor and dignity. Somehow she found the words that turned David around and kept him from the stain of bloodguilt—vengeance that is not ours to take, that will forever haunt us if we do.

What Abigail said made a big impression on David. He blessed her for her words and sent her home in peace, with reassurances that four hundred men would not be marching on her house that day. She and

1. One translator puts it this way: “Thus may God do to David and even more, if I leave from all that is his until morning a single pissar against the wall!” Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 2, *Prophets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 282. Even the King James Version of the Bible doesn’t hold back: “So and more also do God unto the enemies of David, if I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall” (v. 22).

2. With thanks to Lin-Manuel Miranda and his *Hamilton* war heroes.

her household were safe, he said, because of her good sense. He didn't mention her courage, but we can: Abigail's courage was truly exceptional. If David had chosen to ignore her words (and she had no way of knowing whether he would or not), she might have been the first fatality of many. As it happened, the only fatality in Abigail's house was a death no one mourned: Nabal, who collapsed in shock when he heard what his wife had done. Abigail had waited until morning to tell him, when she was sure he'd be sober and would fully appreciate it—which we assume he did, because “his heart died within him; he became like a stone” (v. 37b). David declared it a fitting end to the fool who'd snubbed him, and promptly set about to woo the widow. Sharp-witted, eloquent Abigail became David's wife.

It would be nice to report that Abigail's words continued to make a big impression on David, that she was a wise and trusted counselor when he finally came to the throne. But that's not quite how it went. Abigail barely surfaces after the events in this chapter. She bears David a son named Chileab, who doesn't get much press or attention.³ The boy is only one among David's many sons, the way Abigail is only one among David's many wives.

But Abigail's role in David's life has made a big impression in other places. She is remembered as a person who shaped David's moral character during a volatile and uncertain period of his life. She is regarded as a prophet for the way she called David out and back to his anointed role. She is the only woman in the Bible to be described as both intelligent and beautiful (in that order), and her speech is the longest by any woman in the Old Testament.⁴

Abigail has earned respect. A person does when she exercises unfailingly good judgment. And Abigail did, whether riding forth into danger or riding out years of foolishness; she beat outlaws and ogres with good sense alone. It's quite a record for a biblical character who is often among the last to be noticed. Unless we go alphabetically—and in that case, she leads.

3. See 2 Sam. 3:3.

4. L. Juliana Claassens, “An Abigail Optic: Agency, Resistance, and Discernment in 1 Samuel 25,” in *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 25.

New Testament

A

IS FOR

ALABASTER

Mark 14

While [Jesus] was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor.” And they scolded her. But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Mark 14:3–9

*M*atthew, Mark, Luke, and John are like good storytellers everywhere: they may start with the same material, but they shape it and tell it differently, with the little touches and flourishes that make each of their Gospels unique. It’s not unusual for one of them to include a detail the others don’t. This story about the woman who anointed Jesus is a prime example. It’s in all four Gospels, with the same basic plot we read above (dinner table interruption, extravagant act, spluttering

men, protective Jesus), but Mark is the only one with the nerve to let the woman make a scene *and* a mess.¹

In Mark 14, the woman takes her alabaster jar and breaks it, right there at the table, before she pours out the oil. In fact, she smashes it to pieces; that's what the word means. It's as much commotion as if she'd walked into the dining room with an enormous jar of applesauce and flung it with great ceremony to the floor. Immediate chaos: jar shattering, broken pieces flying, shards of applesauce-coated alabaster in everyone's food. A big, sticky, splintery mess that's hideous to clean up. And while the oil in this scene would cost ten thousand times more than a forty-eight-ounce jar of applesauce—no exaggeration—the *mess* is the point, and the intentional nature of breaking open the jar. Maybe adding splatter to the splutter was a little too much for Matthew, Luke, and John, who keep the jars in their Gospels whole and intact. But Mark emphasizes the woman's act of breaking, and he wants us to reflect on it. What does it mean, to her and to Jesus, that she breaks open that alabaster jar?

A jar like this, in Jesus' day, was steeped in meaning to begin with. Alabaster is a delicate, translucent stone that was often used in antiquity for carved ornamental vases and bottles for precious oils, like the nard this one contained. An alabaster jar was expensive enough. The ointment inside was outrageous. It cost as much as a person might earn in a year, and those who could afford it saved it for their funerals. An alabaster jar of pure nard might sit on a shelf for years until it was needed to anoint a body for burial. Then it would be broken open—the jars were typically sealed—and the ointment used ceremonially. All of which is to say, this was *not* the oil for back rubs or babies or hairstyling. It was not the sort of thing a person offered around casually, as if it were a plate of hors d'oeuvres. The oil in this jar had a serious, sacred function. It wasn't to be broken into to serve the living, but the dead.

This explains why the dinner guests are so disoriented, and then shocked, and then outraged by the woman's behavior: to them, it's an ungodly scene and a mess. Who on earth takes an alabaster jar from the vault where it's supposed to sit from the day you buy it until

1. See Matt. 26:6–13; Luke 7:36–50; and John 12:1–8 for their accounts of this story.

the day you die, and then *breaks it open* before its time (a prodigal move we've seen before) and pours it all out when crashing a dinner that isn't even a funeral?!

Scholars have thought long and hard about why the woman does what she does and why it creates such a scene. Most of them conclude that she's not just making trouble. She's making good trouble, and for very good reasons.² Her act might be a mysterious identification ritual—anointing Jesus in the manner of kings, because she's worked out who he is, truly the Messiah. Or it might be a dangerous act of resistance—anointing Jesus in defiance of Caesar, since Roman law declared Caesar to be a god *and* king. Or it might be a prophetic act—anointing Jesus for death, because he is about to suffer and die, since this is the kind of king he is. Whatever this act is, and whatever it means, the woman isn't doing it for shock value. She's doing it out of deep conviction.

This helps us understand more about the woman's character. She is bold. And brave. And confident. And daring. And ready to risk everything. And longing to give everything. And prepared to spend everything, in one holy, extravagant gesture. And she is the only one in the room who understands who Jesus is and what that understanding requires of her, urgently, in this moment—that she anoint him with the finest oil a human being can offer up to God. What she does with this oil tells us who Jesus is.

But what she does with the jar tells us something too—about what she must do first, before she can anoint Jesus. She has to smash that jar to pieces. *Her* jar, the one with her name on it. The alabaster jar she is never supposed to open, because the oil it contains is marked for one use. It isn't an oil of life at all in that alabaster jar. It's the oil of death, her death. Stopped up and waiting. Stuffed away in a corner, like all the other painful secrets that bleed away life.

Yet the woman takes her alabaster jar and brings it to Jesus, and she *breaks it open!*—which is the detail Mark is determined we see. He chooses the same word for “breaking open” that's used for breaking

2. With thanks to the late Representative John Lewis. Making “good trouble,” as he put it, was a motto he lived and one he preached to graduates at many commencements, including that of my oldest son at Decatur High School in 2009.

chains and bones and, on one occasion, stone tablets (because the surprise party centerpiece that night was a golden calf). With those echoes from other stories in Scripture, we get the message loud and clear. Breaking open an alabaster jar is like smashing stone tablets over the backs of idols. Breaking chains that bind us. Crushing bones that haunt us. And it's not an accident, this kind of smashing. We need to mean it. We need to want it.

Jesus saw that the woman was breaking open her own jar of death. Offering him the oil in the purest way she knew how. He called it beautiful,³ what she'd done—which isn't anything like what the dinner guests called it. They watched this scene unfold with something akin to horror, because to them it just looked like waste. It looked like money down the drain. It looked like a woman making trouble, with nothing good about it. And since she was an easy target and their rage was on a roll, they lit into her with relish, howling about lost hypothetical profits. All they could do was shout about how profligate she was, and how virtuous *they* would be, if they'd had charge of that alabaster jar. Why, they would have sold it! And made a sweet deal of it too! And then they'd have given the money to the poor!

Jesus had to point out that they *did* have charge of at least one alabaster jar: their own, which was probably at home in the vault. If they wanted, they could sell it and help the poor—because God knows, as long as there are men hoarding alabaster jars in vaults, there will be economic disparities that create rich and poor. That wasn't the issue here, he said. The issue was what we do with the oil that is ours and what we do when we see who Jesus truly is. Can we claim our place in the room and give with extravagant joy? Can we smash open the deathly things that hold us back? That's exactly what this woman did so beautifully, Jesus exclaimed. And from now on, you can't preach the gospel without telling her story. *What she has done will be told in memory of her.*

He might have added, “Go and do likewise.” Crash a dinner. Smash a jar. Pour out all the love you have to give, and don't hold a drop of it back.

3. The Greek word *καλὸν* (*kalon*) in verse 6 can be translated “good” or “beautiful.” What the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates as “a good service,” the New International Version (among others) translates as “a beautiful thing.” (NIV: “‘Leave her alone,’ said Jesus. ‘Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me.’”)