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# You Must Be Mad

Mark 14:3-9

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 11 and 12, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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As a pastor I'm always alert to euphemisms. Because when a person uses a euphemism it's an indication they're somehow out of their depth. They're in territory their hearts feel unready and their souls feel uncomfortable to explore. Listen to these choice expressions. "Couple of sandwiches short of a picnic." "Doesn't have both oars in the water." "Elevator's stuck between the floors." "Lights are on but nobody's home." "Wheels're spinning, but the hamster's long gone."

All these expressions tread a line between saying someone's stupid, and saying they're mad. We talk a lot about celebrating diversity, and that means a deeper understanding of mental illness and a deeper respect for those of low IQ. But these expressions and a thousand like them hint at something beyond medical and psychological diagnosis. They're about someone we think is crazy, mad, so eccentric that we reach for a new metaphor. Someone who's done what no one in their right mind would ever do. Something that unsettles us deeply.

The 1996 film *The English Patient* is set in Egypt during the Second World War. A married Englishwoman, Katherine, finds herself often alone as her husband pursues a cartographical expedition. She falls in love with an impossibly exotic Hungarian nobleman, Laszlo. Count Laszlo, another cartographer, discovers a wondrous cave, decorated with prehistoric paintings, deep in the Sahara Desert. Laszlo and Katherine fall into a passionate affair. Katherine's husband, sensing the affair, plans a murderous revenge. He puts Katherine in the back seat of his biplane and flies toward Count Laszlo's excavation camp near the famous cave. He tries to land the plane right on Laszlo himself. But the plan fails. It turns out it's Katherine's husband who dies in the crash. Laszlo, the intended target, sustains only minor injuries; but Katherine's badly hurt. We witness Laszlo carrying her slowly and lovingly to the prehistoric cave.

Now Laszlo and Katherine face an unspeakable predicament. Katherine's injuries are life-threatening. If she's going to live, Laszlo's going to need to go and find medical help. But it's three days' walk to Cairo. It's a dangerous journey. Even if he gets there unscathed, there may be no one he can persuade to bring help. And even if all these ifs meet happy whens, there's got to be only a small chance Katherine will still be alive when Laszlo gets back. What are they to do?

I want you to think about this predicament as the defining question of your life. You've spent four years at a wonderful university. Everything you've learnt here orients you towards solutions, towards answers, towards ways to fix the human body, the human mind, the world's economy, the inside of a laptop, the woes of Washington, the finances of Greece, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the poverty of Somalia, the glitches in the health-care bill. *Are you ready for a problem that doesn't have an answer?*

Count Laszlo's obviously been to Duke. Like everyone sitting in front of me, he's effortlessly handsome, has a mysteriously exotic heritage (provided you go back enough generations), and enjoyed DukeEngage Cairo so much he went back to be the faculty director. But here's a more subtle way he reflects our collective culture. Notice how he scarcely thinks twice before he sets off on his three-day journey to find help. Laszlo has all sorts of adventures before he finally makes it back to the encampment and the ancient cave. And when he does, Katherine is very, very, very dead. Laszlo's so committed to believing that there's a solution to Katherine's agonizing plight, and that he has the solution, that he overlooks the one thing needful. And that is, being with Katherine. He's so concerned to solve the problem that he leaves her alone in her hour of greatest need.

I wonder whether the real Laszlo went to Cairo was because he couldn't bear to watch Katherine die. I wonder whether we fill our lives with activity and creativity and productivity because we fear if we sat still we'd go to pieces. We'd go... mad. It never occurs to any of us to think this frenzy of programming and experiencing and sampling and trying out is madness. On the contrary, it's those that lag behind or stand outside our frenetic world that we regard as mad. Elevator not going to the top floor. As the Australians say, Couple of kangaroos short of a full paddock.

Notice another thing about Laszlo's desperate efforts to save Katherine. I'm willing to bet almost everyone graduating today hears this story and assumes they're Laszlo. But let me tell you a secret. Your parents, your grandparents, and your pathologically patronizing older siblings: they all think you're Katherine. They remember you when you were a baby: vulnerable and defenseless and needy. And they tend to forget that you've ever grown up. They still think you're Katherine even though you're as fit and flourishing as you'll ever be. And here's the scary part. Your parents know that one day *they'll* be Katherine. They'll be infirm, and weak in mind and body. And they wonder what kind of a Laszlo you'll be. Will you stay by their side until morning is nigh? Or will you be always in Cairo, always seeking solutions, all for their benefit but never with them when all they want is you?

What's at the bottom of all this? Let me suggest a possible answer. What we're all trying to do is to construct a world that works perfectly well without love. If you've got a problem, here's a host of solutions. Come to a wonderful university like Duke, and learn how to put the world to rights. Don't you wonder how much of this is like Laszlo walking to Cairo? What Katherine needed was the man she loved to be with her as she faced the near-certainty of her own impending death. But Laszlo didn't, or maybe couldn't, give her what she needed. We're turning our world into a Laszlo society, full of products, full of gadgets, full of devices, full of techniques, full of energy, all of which make the world go round very effectively.

And the result is that we've all become Laszlo. We would all walk to Cairo rather than stay with Katherine. Wouldn't we? We'd be mad not to. Crazy. Out of our mind. One or two cans short of a sixpack. Blinded by... by... by... love.

We've heard a lot about Egypt, this last year. Egypt's special to Jews, because that's where God delivered them from slavery through the Exodus. It's also where the great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides lived. Egypt is special to Muslims, because that's where the prophet Ishmael's mother, Hagar, came from. It's also where Al-Azhar University, the world's finest center of Muslim learning, is to be found. Egypt is special to Christians too. Christians recall another man who walked across the Egyptian desert. But in his case, unlike Laszlo, the walk took him away from Cairo, away from the city, to make his discovery in the desert. He lived 1700 years ago. His name was St Antony. He was the first Christian monk. This is how he described his life. "A time is coming," he said, "when everyone will go mad. And when they meet someone who's not mad, they'll say, 'You are mad: you are not like us.'"

I wonder if that time has come. I wonder if we've created a world that works remarkably well even if there's no such thing as love. Why've we done this? Because we're all terrified that love will let us down, that others will betray us, that we won't be able to keep our promises, that love will be powerless in the face of death, suffering, loss, and all the things we sense just around the corner. We know how easily love can be prone to self-deception, to passion that goes without patience, to sentimentality and false projections. And none of us want the agony of loving into a void, loving an empty space where a reciprocating love should be. So what do we do? We spend limitless, furious, relentless amounts of time and money investing in the possibility of a future that works even if there's no such thing as love.

Is that your life? One outsized, overwhelming, over-spilling insurance policy to protect yourself lest love should ever let you down? How's it working out for you?

Our reading from the Gospel of Mark is about a woman who took a rather different approach from Laszlo. Jesus is about to be arrested, tried, and crucified. Somehow this woman gets it, while no one else does. I wonder what it's like to know that someone you deeply love is going to die and there's nothing you can do about it. See the social pressure that's exerted on her to change her behavior. She's embarrassing. She's walking into a man's domain. It's indecent. She's touching a man's hair. That's the first-century equivalent of lap dancing. And then they pull out the poverty card. She's being wasteful. That ointment was worth a pretty penny. It could have been sold for thousands of dollars and the money given to the poor. In other words if she'd put her mind to it she could've fixed poverty.

But instead this nameless woman pours the costly ointment over Jesus' head. She does something beautiful, an act of prophecy, because it prepares his body for death, of worship, because she shows he's priceless, and of love, because unlike Laszlo she stays "in the cave" with Jesus rather than leaving his side and fixing things on his behalf. In passing, Jesus says this is how to relate to social disadvantage – not to do things *for* the poor, but to be *with* them and share in their efforts to make their own lives beautiful. But the point of the story is quite simple. Jesus praises the woman because she shows us what God is like. God pours out the profligate wonder of glory in a colossal waste of resources – while we stand around and get cross because we expect much more practical solutions. Jesus is like the precious ointment, poured out in a beautiful overflowing of love.

Of course the woman's crazy. Mad. Bonkers. Out of her mind. Not dealing from a full deck. Why's she crazy? What's her problem? That's obvious. She's living in a world where there's nothing but love. She's living in the cave that Laszlo couldn't abide to wait in. Laszlo looks at his dying beloved and goes on an interminable journey to find a solution. This mad woman touches her doomed mentor and pours out her life and wealth and public esteem in a gesture that says, "I want to do something as beautiful as you."

She's a crazy woman. She's out of her mind. Laszlo, on the other hand... Laszlo, poor chap, terrible situation. But we understand Laszlo. Laszlo's like us. Did the only thing he could do. Sorry it didn't turn out happily. Yet the irony of the movie is that when Laszlo, returning to Cairo with Katherine's body, crashes another plane, and is himself horribly injured, he's found and tenderly accompanied by strangers and cared for until the point of his death. He receives from strangers at the end of *his* life the patient love he wasn't able to give to Katherine at the end of hers.

Here lies the central choice of your life. Are you going to give in to the frenzy, and construct a life that's designed to work perfectly well if there were no such thing as love? Or is your life going to be a parable, a beautiful, extravagant gesture of prophecy and worship and love, that others call crazy, but which offers a mirror of God's very own way of being with us? Are you going to be Laszlo or the crazy woman? Are you going to love, or search for solutions?

"A time is coming," said St Antony, "when everyone will go mad. And when they meet someone who's not mad, they'll say, 'You're mad: you're not like us.'"

I have one simple prayer today. My prayer is that that person – that crazy person, that person who's not like us, that person who turns out to be like God; my prayer is that that person will be you.