

Don't worry about the smell.

We are fast approaching the high point of the church year. Next week Palm Sunday begins the Holy week leading up to Jesus' death and his the empty tomb.

The same thing is happening in the gospel of John... the raising of Lazarus is the final "sign" Jesus uses to point to his ultimate purpose...**to be the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and in return, give the world Life in abundance!**

But it's a strange sign. Don't you think? Why does Jesus bring a dead guy back to life when he could have just prevented the death in the first place? Martha poses the question but I think it could have come from of any of us..."Lord if only you would have been here"

Yet maybe that's exactly the anxiety Jesus is addressing. For the people of John's community, a generation removed from the actual events, and for us thousands of years later, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is much more than the resuscitation of a corpse.

It is Jesus putting the resurrection in the "present tense", as one commentator put it. Resurrection is not just hope, or power, reserved for the future. Jesus says, "**I am** the resurrection and the Life, [right now, right here.] Can you believe it?"

Because when we believe the resurrection is not far off but has already happened and is actively changing us and the world around us, it gives us courage and strength when things around us **start to stink.**

"Lord, there is a stench! He's been dead four days," says Martha I'm drawn to that line this morning. Aroma has powerful effect on us. One whiff can provoke long dormant memories. For instance moth balls will flash an image of my grandmother's basement in my mind and every time I open a bottle of ammonia I'm taken back to cleaning out the chicken house when I was a kid:)

Now we claim to be better at this than some. Rural people know that offensive smells are often valuable, even essential. But that doesn't mean

we like the stink or that we don't want to run from it when it happens to us, especially when it involves death and despair.

I want to take just a minute to talk about what happens to us after we die. There is really only one thing I am absolutely certain of... I have no power over death. Only God can give life so what happens to us after we die is entirely out of our hands.

None of our goodness can guarantee heaven. None of our badness can prevent it. There is no choosing or deciding on our part that can affect the outcome. We can't influence God with the right kind of praying or make a deal to offer the right kind of sacrifice. **We have no power to give life. Only God does... but God is good and God is love.**

And that is a blessed gift! We can live believing that God has already defeated the power of death, not by avoiding it or preventing **but by living through it.** And we can be assured that God provides a WAY for us to live through it as well.

And then, with the stink of death transformed into the fragrance of life, we find ourselves with an unexpected aroma...the aroma of Christ who said to the community of Lazarus, "you are my partners in this life-giving business". **Unbind this man and let him go!**

The story of Lazarus is not just the story of Jesus giving life but it is also the inclusion of the community into the work God is doing in the world.

Now I don't have to tell you the world is still a stinky place, and it does little good to try and cover cover it up.

It stinks to experience sickness, or disability,

It stinks for abilities to be taken from us over time.

It stinks to be made fun of, to be the victim of bullies, to feel like no cares.

And it stinks to utter high heaven to grieve the death of a loved one,

no matter how many ways people try to freshen it up.

Even Jesus grieves, even Jesus is moved by a deep passion at the senselessness of death.

But Jesus is not afraid of the stench. He calls life out from the midst of it and then releases that life into the care of the community.

Sisters and brothers, we are that community today. Having been joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in our baptism, God indeed abides in us. In the middle of the stench of death and despair, we find the aroma of Life and new beginnings.

Let me tell you of a time when that was powerfully true in my life and in the life of several others who went to Haiti last year. We entered the Wings of Hope home for the severely disabled in Haiti without knowing what to expect. What became immediately apparent was the smell, the stench really, of humanity. We've gotten pretty good at eliminating our own "aromas" in the developed world. For the most part we flush it down the toilet, exhaust it outside, or cover it up with air fresheners, dryer sheets, and scented detergent. But in Haiti, especially in a home for severely disabled children, the smell of humanity was much more pungent. So much so that even some of us seasoned farmer types had difficulty at times.

And yet by the time we had left that place, after we had held those children, washed their soiled clothing, laughed and learned with them and been enlivened by their joy and their faithfulness, **it felt as if it were we who were the ones who were resurrected, we were the ones unbound and let go.**



That is what real life is like when Jesus, the crucified and risen One, abides with us. There can be darkness, there can be the stench of death, and yet out of that, God brings light and life, right now, in the present tense, as well as in the future that never ends.

That changes everything and it means we don't have to avoid the smell of others and their problems because out of them, God is about to call out new life...and God doesn't want us missing out. Amen.