

Lent5_YrC_031316_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

We are nearing the end of the season of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday - the Sunday of the Passion - leading us to Holy Week and Jesus' journey to the cross.

Today we return to the Gospel of John, to the story of a celebration dinner in the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany. The party is at the home of Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus, who has recently been raised from the dead by their good friend Jesus. That's why they are celebrating.

You remember the story: Jesus had been across the river when an urgent message came to him from Mary and Martha. "Lord, he whom you love is ill." And even though Jesus loved all three of them, he waited a couple of days before going to see them. He knew that it was too late, that Lazarus was dead, and when he got there he learned that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days.

Lazarus was not just sleeping. He was not figuratively dead like the son of last week's lesson, whose father said, "This son of mine who was dead has come back to life." He was *not only merely dead*; he was *really most sincerely dead*. Dead dead. Dead enough to raise a stink. And Jesus wept.

Then, as Barbara Brown Taylor describes it, [Jesus] "*roared so loud at death that he scared death away.*" And Lazarus stumbled out of the tomb like a character in a bad horror movie.

So this isn't just any dinner party. It's a time of rejoicing!

Not everything about this party is happy-go-lucky, though.

There is also an underlying current of tension in the room. When Jesus went to Lazarus' tomb, he was already aware that he was being watched. Herod - that fox - and other leaders were talking about what to do about him. They were afraid that he would stir up so much resentment against the authorities that there would be a rebellion - and chaos. After Lazarus was raised, eyewitnesses told the high priest and the Pharisees that Jesus had really crossed the line this time - and that set the wheels in motion for his arrest and his death a few days later.

It would be easy to imagine that Jesus is tense - stressed - about his upcoming journey to Jerusalem and the events that he can only imagine might be in front of him. Lots of people with higher pay grades than me have debated how much Jesus knew of his fate from the beginning, but nobody really knows for sure. But as fully human, and aware of the trouble he was causing for the authorities, it is not a stretch at all to think that he was at the very least a little nervous.

Mary, the sister who sat at Jesus' feet when he came to visit, was probably aware of the scuttlebutt as well. They knew each other well. Jesus loved this family and each of them loved him. She was probably able to sense his apprehension more than anyone else. Mary knows already what it will take the others a long time to figure out - that Jesus is literally going to give up his life in order to give Lazarus a chance to live again.

Then, in the midst of all the festivities, Mary goes to another part of the house, and comes back with a jar full of a very expensive and highly aromatic ointment. She gets down on the floor, breaks the neck of the bottle, and pours it on Jesus' feet. She lets down her long hair - which isn't done in her culture, except by a wife in front of her husband. She puts her hands on Jesus' feet and rubs the ointment into them. Then she wipes the excess off with her hair.

She is anointing his feet for burial. (I knew that anointing one's head happens often in the Bible - in Psalm 23: *thou anointest my head with oil*; ordinary people get oil poured on their heads to make them royalty; and when we baptize folks, we make the sign of the cross on their foreheads with the oil of chrism. But I didn't learn until this week, in my study, that when you are preparing a body for burial you start with the feet.)

The smell of the burial ointment spreads through the whole house. It overtakes the smell of the meal Martha has prepared for her guests. It even overtakes the smell of the tomb that Lazarus has emerged from only a few days before. The smell of life and the smell of death. Smells that please and smells that repulse. When the other guests look back on what happens to Jesus in Jerusalem next week, they will always remember that smell.

Our sense of smell is very strong in terms of what we remember. It relates closely to how we experience life and process important memories.

I can remember what my grandmother smelled like when I would climb into her bed early in the morning and snuggle while she sang songs and read stories to me. I can remember the smell of the Old Spice aftershave that my dad wore *all. the. time.* (Not all smells are pleasant, but all smells can evoke memories!) And I remember the smell of my brother-in-law's room in the ICU when he was dying.

Recently, I have been stressed, tense, anxious about what the future holds for me. It was suggested to me that I might get a massage so I made an appointment with a friend who is a massage therapist. I am telling you this because of the wonderful smell of the oil as it was rubbed into my tight, aching muscles - a smell I could smell the rest of that day and throughout the night. I will remember that smell as the smell of pain and relief, of fear and protection.

There are other smells in the Gospel - the smell of good wine; the smell of the hot sun on the stone walls of a well; the smell of a man's pallet that he's been lying on for 38 years; the smell of bread and fish; the smell of mud spread on the eyes of a man born blind; the smell of fresh, green grass that feeds a hungry flock; the smell of a decomposing body.

Think of the smells you remember. The smell of life and the smell of death. The smell of love, comfort and safety. The smell of fear and pain and loss.

They all exist simultaneously. We can't have one without the other. That's the hard part about this text. We may want Mary's love for Jesus to drive away the stink of death, but it won't happen. We may ask if this act of love won't allow us to believe that life will have the last word. Won't Jesus' resurrection cancel out death?

Well, yes and no. We can't erase the pain and power of death. None if that will change with Jesus' resurrection. Death will still smell like death. Death will still come to all of us, no matter what we do to keep it at bay.

And yet everything changes with Jesus' resurrection, as long as we realize that the smell of abundant love and the smell of death will be there together. It is while we smell death that we can smell life. It is while we smell a rotting body in a tomb that we can smell the fresh earth underneath the stone as it is being rolled away. It is while we can hardly stand another whiff of Lazarus that Mary pours the ointment on Jesus' feet.

We can't choose to smell one thing over another. The smells are just there – together -- and somehow, we have to figure out how we're going to deal with the smells, the memories they bring back, the feelings that go with those memories, and the effects – good or bad – that the feelings bring on. That's the power of the sense of smell, and the power of this story. Good and bad, love and betrayal, confusion and order. It holds the season of Lent together with Easter so tightly that we cannot separate the two. One does not exist without the other.

This is the truth – and the hope -- of the Incarnation. Thanks be to God.