

This Stinks

A Sermon Expositing John 11:1-45

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Last year, you may recall, the thing that was making some of you a bit sick with coughing and sneezing was an *abundance* - of pollen. It was a couple weeks further into the liturgical year, it was Holy Week and we had just put Jesus into the tomb again with our Good Friday Tenebrae service. While most of us have to wait three days after that service to experience resurrection in all its liturgical glory, the choir goes straight in to rehearse for Easter Sunday and the Alleluias come right away for them. Well, last year they went right in and rehearsed in the chapel, which is incidentally where we had also staged the Easter Lilies and the tulips and the hydrangeas, and the other flowers that had been delivered for Sunday earlier on Friday. It turns out that's a pretty good way to decimate a choir, to put them in an enclosed space with freshly disturbed spring flowers and ask them to sing for an hour or so. I think most of you were almost over the consequences by the time that great gettin' up mornin' arrived, but not many of you were quite ready to let us forget about that little logistical faux pas. Even so, by then we had set the flowers out in the Sanctuary where they were still just as fragrant and beautiful as they had been on Friday. It was almost too much if you remember. They were so aromatic that many of us reflected, "*Wow, that smells so...SO wonderful.*" But I think that's what Easter is supposed to be isn't it. It's supposed to be such an abundance of beauty and wonder and delight and joy and fragrance that it's almost - *almost* too much. Easter smelled wonderful last year.

And oh we laughed. Do you remember? We had a mouse running around among the pews last year. A vole actually, some of you said. I could see it from the pulpit only by the change in expressions on faces running like a wave through the congregation as it scurried beneath your feet. And then he came up in the pulpit with me, tried to climb up my robe. Did a lap around the communion table and ran down inside the French Horn of the brass quintet - which was itself magnificent. Oh Easter. It was so beautiful and so wonderful and so fragrant last year.

Well, God is going to show up for Easter again this year and will have a chance to whisper the mystery of resurrection among us in a way that's never been possible before. And I'm grateful for that, I really am. But for a moment, just for a moment can I lament the fact that Easter isn't going to be the same this year and that stinks.

It isn't just the pageantry or the pretty flowers or the ritual or even the music that I'll miss the most, it's the way that all of those things really do work to heighten our spirits, the way we really go overboard and literally pull out all the stops to highlight this central truth of the Christian faith and the way that all the effort and all the beauty and all the fragrance really do point to resurrection. It just stinks that it won't be the same this year.

I don't know about you, but even though Easter will be different this year and even though I am disappointed by that I haven't really had time or attention to give that feeling. Or at least not that feeling for that reason. There is so much I'm disappointed about and sad about and frankly worried about right now. Not everyone has had the luxury of being somewhat removed from the worst of it as I have, but with each passing

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

day it becomes even more real to me. Sure, even the introvert within me is ready to be out of the house and back among you all and among those with whom I share this human experience, but my isolation isn't anywhere near the fullness of it. Bev Reynolds, you know by now, is in hospice care. I am grateful that the hospital staff have allowed her family to come and be with her some, but not as often as they might otherwise be with her if we weren't in the middle of a pandemic and it's been a struggle to get that time. Our organist, Sam Baker's, husband, Jim Weaver has contracted the Corona Virus, he has Covid 19 and is in the hospital on a ventilator unable to receive visitors or speak by phone and Sam is in the necessary quarantine. It stinks. This virus, this pandemic, social distancing, it all stinks and even that doesn't get at it. It more than stinks, it is putrid.

It is pushing those who love one another into isolation. It threatens to destroy the livelihoods of an untold number. It will devastate the most vulnerable first and longest. It causes tremendous suffering. A survivor wrote in the New York Times this week that it feels like breathing in fire. And it is deadly. We have already lost too many and we will lose more. It isn't enough to say that all of this stinks. It smells like death. It smells like a grave, like a tomb.

It smells like that place where they laid Lazarus when he'd died. For four days he'd been there locked away from all that gives one life. Taken from those who loved him, his lungs absent of the breath of life, his body on its way back to the earth and giving off an odor. It stinks in that place, largely, but not exclusively due to Lazarus's death. His death carried with it another reality – Jesus said this wouldn't happen. They sent for him when the depth of Lazarus's illness became clear. There is one, they thought, whose love for Lazarus is so strong and whose power is enough to hold death at bay, so they sent for him. Jesus sent back words of comfort, "This illness does not lead to death." Part of the stench in that place was figuring out what about the promise of Jesus had failed them. They had expressed a profound faith in him to be there when they needed him and to be *able* in the face of their fear to restore the one they loved to health. Was it Jesus's ability they could not trust? Or his desire? What other priority could have kept him away while death was strengthening its grip on the one he loved so dearly? Was it ability or goodness that he lacked that allowed such a thing to happen? Asking that question stinks. And in that place that stench mingled with that of death and together it smelled a lot like things smell in our world today.

I've caught myself saying, "This is just weird," a lot. In the midst of my day I'll realize that I'm *still* at home. Other than a brief visit to Bev's bedside this week I've seen only the grocery store (and that not very much) and the canal trail (and that quite a lot). My routines are off, my sense of the passing of time is all over the place, my priorities have shifted, it's all just weird. And it's bad weird, because I know of the suffering around me that will captivate these days and will push out into the unknown future for a great many people around the world. And amid this stench, amid the smell of death and decay we hear, "this does not end in death," and we try to remain faithful, but how do we do that? How do we place our hope in life when death has already come?

Did you do the math when we read the gospel lesson a few minutes ago? Worry not, newly homeschooling parents. We won't apply the common core standards to this lesson. When Jesus received word of Lazarus's illness he sent word that it would not end in death then he tarried where he was for two days. When he finally arrived, Lazarus had been gone for four days. That means that the messenger bearing the news that this will not end in death arrived after Lazarus had already died! The end Jesus said would not come already had it seemed – until Lazarus, still bound in his grave clothes came walking out of that tomb. The journey they were on didn't lead *to* death, it was simply passing through.

One of the most important proclamations of the season of Lent is one that I may never understand, but I have come to recognize its truth. Rather than reroute our lives and all of creation around this reality we call death, God has chosen to join us as we pass through it. The suffering we endure, the suffering of the world matters to God. When we weep, God weeps with us and even still reminds us this is not the end.

Friends, even if we could be together on Easter Sunday there wouldn't be enough lilies and hydrangeas to cover the stench of what we've experienced together. We are still at the tomb, there is still deadliness all around us and it reeks. We find our hope in this time not in minimizing what is happening or looking on with

rose colored glasses. Quite to the contrary we find our hope in realizing fully where we are and knowing that God is weeping with us and by proclaiming loudly that this is not where the journey ends.

For those whose livelihoods will have been, will be lost, our drawing together to pick them back up will proclaim that this story doesn't end there. For those patterns of life that are disturbed, those celebratory moments for which we were supposed to be together, our collective yearning to be together stronger now than ever will proclaim that this is not where this ends. Even for those we have lost and those we may yet lose, the mystery of our faith reminds us that death itself is not the end. This disruption to lives and livelihoods really stinks and it will for some time going forward, but it does not end in death.

Amen.