

**The Fifth Sunday in Lent + April 2, 2017**

Some ancient Christian icons depicting the Raising of Lazarus include Martha standing near the tomb while covering her nose with the garment of her sleeve. How appropriate! Martha is the one who warned of the stench from the tomb where Lazarus' body laid for four days. Still other icons depict one or more persons from the crowd holding their noses. The smell from the tomb is foul. There is a stench.

The *King James Version* of the Bible states it rather eloquently: "It stinketh!"

We know this to be true, don't we? Death stinks.

Who doesn't want to hold their nose at the stench of death?

The stench is there but we can at least keep it at bay or pretend it doesn't exist.

And isn't that a very common thing to do in the face of death? In fact, we even refuse to utter the word. Instead of saying that someone has died, we will say "she passed" or "he passed away."

We might even try to put a good spin on death by speaking platitudes to one another like "It's okay" or "It's all for the best" even though our hearts are crushed and we know deep within us that it is not okay. We might even suggest that death is somehow God's will or that God has taken this life away.

In many and various ways we cover our noses but the stench doesn't go away. We cannot hold our breath for long. At some point we must breathe in the stench. We must name it, feel it, and say it plainly - "This stinks!"

Jesus says it rather plainly: "Lazarus is dead." Then Jesus proceeds to the place of his death. Now, why go to that place? Doesn't it make more sense to flee from the foul odor and to bypass the tomb?

But Jesus wants to go there because it is there – it the place of death – that God will do a new thing.

What a radical gesture! Jesus will not resist going to that place where the pangs of grief are palpable, where Mary and Martha are angry at Jesus for waiting so long and where Jesus discovers the crowds of people weeping. Jesus begins to weep.

Many of us in this assembly have felt the intensity of grief in big ways just over the past several weeks. In those grieving rituals held here and by the graveside, I always include, as one of the scripture readings, Jesus' words to Mary: "I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe

in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

I always want to include this scripture not because the promise of Jesus removes the sting of death or the stink of death. No, I want to always say this word to remind all gathered that even as we grieve, we cling to hope.

Death does not have the final word. We commend our beloved ones to God’s everlasting care. God is eternal is God’s love is eternal. God does not take lives as the platitudes suggest. Rather, God receives lives. More to the point, these words of promise are for the living. They point to the truth that eternal life is now and that where there is death, God brings newness. God steps into those deathly places to create new life.

Almost twenty years ago, my father died rather unexpectedly. I remember well the feeling of hopelessness and helplessness and this loss touched upon all other losses in my life; losses over which I failed to grieve. I wanted to simply cover my nose but what I discovered was that I had to breathe in the stench or else I would continue to journey in ways that were not life giving. I found the psalms to be a great gift as honest expressions of grief, like the one we prayed today: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O God. Listen to my voice!”

What was the newness God brought? I don’t know exactly but I think it had something to do with God setting me anew on a trajectory of dying to false ambitions and the need to be in control that opened me up a little bit to new places of vulnerability and being open to others.

I spoke with a friend once who said his experience of the death of someone he loved softened his heart in such a way that he felt a new compassion toward others.

Another friend once shared with me the common story of family’s torn apart coming together around someone’s death and for her this led to new journeys in reconciliation and forgiveness.

This is all part of the mystery at the heart of the Christian life: We learn truly to live first by dying. This is the mystery at the heart of the Gospels where Good Friday must precede Easter.

No wonder we descend into something like a tomb at our baptisms! Here at Phinney during the Easter Vigil the vessel is a horse trough - a watery grave where a woman or man or child is joined to Jesus in his death. There we leave behind the fake gods built around greed, hatred and violence and say that they are an illusion. And Jesus brings us to the watery grave to put to death the power these things have in our lives. We don’t stay for long in the watery grave. For Jesus says to us what Jesus said to his friend Lazarus: “Child of God. Come out!”

And we come out, dripping wet, and leaving the stench behind in a journey marked by love where we discover again that the way of the cross is the way of life. Amen.