

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Lent 5 (A) - 22 March 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

*They said to him, "Lord, come and see."
Jesus began to weep.
In the Name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

The call came early on a Sunday morning. I was finishing my coffee, waiting for my babysitter to arrive – the boys were just seven, five, and two at the time – so that I could head out the door and get to church.

When my phone rang and I saw that it was my Senior Warden, my heart sank. I was meant to see Birgitte in just a few minutes, so she would not be ringing now unless there were a crisis. Birgitte was a physician at a hospital in the Bronx, so she was more-or-less unflappable; her “crisis bar” was fairly high. She also was Danish, and she prided herself on her Scandinavian reserve. Let’s just say that she was not one to joke.

So I knew that if Birgitte was calling before seven in the morning, something must be *wrong*. I braced myself as I answered.

Mother Patty, I'm here at the church, and I'm wondering: Do you know how to get the smell of dead skunk out of the sanctuary?

Not just skunk – but *dead* skunk. You cannot make this stuff up.

Because that was *not* one of the lessons they taught us in seminary, I asked her to open the windows (even though it was a particularly frigid New York winter) and sit tight until I got there. I also told her to Google.

By the time I arrived Birgitte and the Junior Warden, whom she had conscripted into action, had gone to the store and cleared the shelves of Febreze. Meanwhile, they had sent our intrepid Minister of Music down into the dirt cellar beneath the kitchen to assess the situation. Steve quickly came back up, the color drained from his face.

He confirmed that, indeed, our guest had gotten in through a hole in the foundation and died behind the boiler – and that another, very-much-alive, skunk was, as Steve put it, “sitting *shiva*.”

You cannot make this stuff up.

We all know that pungent, nose-stinging sign of death when it hangs in the air. It is a distinctive odor that is difficult to “un-smell.”

It is the smell of decay.

It is the smell of sorrow.

It also is the smell of survival.

Recent studies have found that putrescine, the organic compound responsible for that odor, actually triggers our “fight or flight” response, warning us of impending danger.¹

As unpleasant as it is, it is adaptive. Avoiding death is hard-wired into us.

¹ <https://www.discovermagazine.com/what-death-really-smells-like-and-how-your-brain-knows-what-to-do-about-it-48194>

I'm going to ask you to hold that smell, if you can, in your imagination as we turn to this morning's Gospel.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is likely familiar to most of us. It appears only in John, as one of the seven "signs," or "miracles," that the Gospel writer uses to demonstrate Jesus' divinity. There is no question whatsoever in John's mind, but that Jesus *is* God, Who "became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14).

So in the Gospel of John if we want to know Who God is, we need only look at what Jesus *does*.

You may have noticed that I talk a lot about the INCARNATION, the "enfleshment" of God – Jesus taking on human life and experience in order to show us who God is. This doctrine is central to my theology, to my understanding of how God works.

So many times in the Gospels Jesus says some version of

If you want to know who I am, stop what you are doing and follow Me. .

Watch Me.

Listen to Me.

To Thomas He even says, *Touch Me.*

And...

It turns out that the Incarnation is a two-way street. Not only does Jesus show us Who God is, but He wants us to show Him who *we* are – the delight and grief that we carry on our own hearts.

This is what happens in the story of Lazarus.

As we've just heard, Jesus' friends, Mary and Martha, have sent word to Jesus that their brother – “whom Jesus loves” – is ill. But Jesus doesn't race to His friend's bedside; rather, He takes His sweet time.

Martha tells Him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Moments later Mary – weeping – echoes her sister, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

The Jews at the tomb with Mary, and Martha, say, “Lord, come and see.”

The very language that Jesus uses to invite people into relationship with Him now is addressed to Him. Incarnation is a two-way street.

And Jesus, as we know, weeps.

But lest we misread this moment, it's important to understand that these aren't sentimental tears. The Greek suggests “inward commotion,” “anxiety,” or “distress.” Jesus is “greatly disturbed in spirit.”²

The verb here “connotes anger and indignation, not compassion.”³

We tend to think of Jesus as unflappable, don't we? His “crisis bar” is fairly high.

Yet here His composure slips a bit.

He isn't sad. He is frustrated, and annoyed – at death itself, *and* at the human capacity to misunderstand.

² <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/tarasso.html>

³ Gail O'Day, “John”, *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, 690.

Every time Jesus calls people to “come and see,” He is inviting them to see new life, to witness the power of the divine in the world. *Watch what God’s about to do now!*

But here people are inviting Jesus to “come and see” and sit *shiva* – to pay homage in the face of death.⁴

This disturbs Jesus’ spirit. He gets His back up.

When He approaches the tomb and tells the people to roll away the stone, Martha’s first impulse is to try to protect Him from the worst part of human experience.

“Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,” she warns.

Four days. According to Jewish belief, the soul hovered near the body for three days, after which there was no hope for resuscitation.⁵

This means that Lazarus is well and truly dead. *It’s really over,* says Martha.

And then there is that stench.

But Jesus is not put off by any of it.

Notice that there is nothing sanitized about this moment.

He doesn’t put on a mask and gloves.

He doesn’t call for a can of Febreze.

He calls Lazarus to come out. He tells the crowd to “unbind him and let him go.”

⁴ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/lent5a/#John>

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Vol. 1, 423.

Jesus wrenches Lazarus – and Martha and Mary, and the crowd of gathered mourners – from the grip of the belief that death gets the last word.

Yes, He is frustrated and annoyed at our human tendency to smell decay and sorrow in those places where God is working to bring new life.

But He's also not afraid to walk straight into it.

Even now.

Even today, in our own time, when mothers and fathers cry themselves to sleep out of fear for their children.

When the stench of death – physical death, and the death of human decency— seems to permeate every corner of our lives.

When the shroud of burial threatens to strangle our hope and joy.

Here's the thing: Lazarus will die again. He will not live forever. Neither will you. Neither will I. Neither will our children or grandchildren.

Jesus doesn't deny that. What He *does* deny is the power of death to destroy forever.

Jesus weeps when we point to death but cannot recognize new life before our very eyes.

My friends, resurrection is happening in our midst – in ways large and small – right this minute.

It always is.

Our job is to help unbind one another, lest we fall for the fiction that it's all really over.

Jesus says no. Do not be deterred by the stench of the world – even though it is pungent and cannot be un-smelled.

Walk straight in, and call forth new life.

Come and see.

Amen.