

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
*“Smelling Like a Rose”***

John 11:32 – 44

All-Saints’ Sunday

November 1, 2015

If there’s one thing that drives me nuts, it’s walking into a room, smelling something that stinks to high heaven, and then not being able to figure out where it’s coming from. You know what I mean? Like, if you’ve been on vacation, and you come back home and walk into the kitchen, and you realize, whoa, something went bad in here while we were away!

So then you start sniffing around in the pantry, for rotten vegetables; you check the far recesses of the fridge to see if there’s maybe some casserole in there from the summer, that you’ve forgotten about; you look in all the wastebaskets for a ham sandwich or a banana peel that somebody threw in there before you left. I mean, you’re pulling out drawers, and opening cabinets, and looking under tables. And you don’t stop looking until you find whatever it is that stinks, and get rid of it! And that’s because we don’t like stuff that smells bad!

Which is why we use deodorant, and cologne, and perfume, and mouthwash, and shoe sanitizer; it’s why we keep a can of Glade in the bathroom, if you know what I mean; it’s why we follow the cat or the dog around with a bottle of Febreze; it’s why we have a special container, lined with a heavy-duty plastic bag, down in the nursery, for diapers... which, as we know, can be particularly toxic.

It’s why we have, in our kitchen, one of those aromatic candles... that smells like vanilla-cinnamon-pumpkin; and it’s why we used to have one of those little Airwick-thingies that you plug into the wall... that periodically squirts out enough air-freshener to completely overwhelm the whole house with the smell of lavender. We do all of that, just to keep at arm’s length anything that stinks, reeks, smells, or otherwise wages war on our noses and olfactory senses.

Now, I mention this business of trying to keep a lid on offensive odors because, as we saw in our lesson this morning from John’s gospel, it was a real concern in the time of Jesus, too. And not so much because of bad breath or body odor, but because of the smells of death and the decomposition of the body.

Now, this may sound a little ghoulish to our modern sensibilities; but in the time of Jesus, it was a real and daily concern. And a little background might help us to understand why. When a body was laid in a tomb, as Lazarus was in our text, and as Jesus would be, later in the gospel... it didn’t remain in the tomb permanently. Instead, the body was kept in the tomb just long enough for the tissue to decompose, until only the bones remained. In the Mediterranean climate of Palestine, this process usually took about a year. At that point, family members would go back into the tomb, collect the bones, and place them in a stone box called an ossuary. The ossuary would then be moved to a permanent family burial site.

Now, during the year that the body was residing in the tomb, other bodies would also be laid in other parts of the same tomb, as deaths occurred within the community. So, you would have

people going in and out of the tomb, even as it contained several bodies... in various stages of decomposition and decay. And that was why, when a body was prepared for burial, it was wrapped in a shroud filled with perfumes and spices, such as myrrh, aloe, and aromatic oils; it was to cover up the smells of death, for the sake of the other people who had to go in and out of the tomb later.

The most famous example that we have of this, is found, of course, in the resurrection narratives in the gospels; in which the women go to the tomb of Jesus early on Easter morning, armed with spices that they intended to pack around Jesus' body. They hadn't been able to do that on Good Friday, because of the hastiness of Jesus' burial; so they were planning to go into the tomb, and cover Jesus' body with spice. They were not expecting to find Him risen from the dead.

Another thing to keep in mind is this: many Jews in Jesus' day believed that, when a person died, his or her spirit would sort of linger around the body for three days... hoping that the body might be raised from the dead. But after four days the spirit moved on to the afterlife... the reason being that, by this time, decomposition had reached the point where being reanimated was no longer possible. So, after four days, if you were still dead... everybody expected you to stay dead!

Now, again, I'm not going over all this in order to be morbid, or morose, or macabre. It's just that, if we really want to understand one of the major points that John is making in this text, we need to see that John is telling us that Lazarus was truly and irrevocably *dead*. He'd been in the tomb for four days. His body was decomposing and starting to smell of decay, as Martha herself pointed out to Jesus. No longer was a hopeful spirit hovering around Lazarus' tomb, on the chance that it might be reunited with the body.

The text tells us that Lazarus' life was over; and any chance of his being healed or raised from the dead appeared to have been lost forever... when Jesus chose to delay His trip to Bethany for two whole days, after learning that Lazarus was ill. Which is why Mary had said to Jesus, "*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*" Martha had said this same thing to Jesus earlier; and we are probably right to imagine a twinge of resentment in both their voices.

"*Our brother was your friend, Lord,*" the sisters were saying. "*We told you that he was very sick. Why didn't you come when we called you? Why did you drag your feet and horse around, when Lazarus was on his deathbed? Why did you fail us, Jesus?*" That's a very understandable and human way for Martha and Mary to feel. It seemed to the sisters that Jesus had been trifling with their loved one... just when he'd needed Jesus the most. Many of us have probably felt the same way ourselves, at one time or another.

But, earlier in this chapter, Jesus had told Martha, "*Your brother will rise again.*" And now He said again, "*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*"

Now, Martha and Mary and everyone else within earshot thought that Jesus was referring to the general resurrection of the dead, which would happen at the end of the age... when God established His kingdom here on earth. This is why Martha had earlier said, "*I know he will rise again at the last day.*" But that's not what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about something that was going to happen *right now*; and so He answered Martha earlier by saying, "*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*"

And now, standing outside the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus lifted up His voice to His Heavenly Father and said: "*Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.*" John

then tells us that Jesus called out in a loud voice, “*Lazarus, come out!*” And in a scene fit for a scary Halloween movie, Lazarus comes bouncing out of the tomb, “*his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.*”

And once Lazarus was out of the tomb, Jesus said to his friends and family members, “*Take off the grave clothes and let him go.*” And so they did. And there Lazarus stood among them. Not smelling of death, but smelling like a rose... full of new life, new hope, and a new understanding of just what it was that Jesus had come to accomplish.

And what Jesus had come to accomplish was nothing less than the overthrow of the power of death itself. With this sign, Jesus showed that He didn’t come just to change water into wine, or to provide a miraculous sack lunch for five thousand people, or to impress everyone with His wonderful parables, or to argue with the scribes and Pharisees.

No, when He raised Lazarus, Jesus proclaimed to everyone that with His ministry, death had been defeated... once and for all. And that with the power of Almighty God, new life, resurrection life, awaits us... when God establishes His kingdom in the new creation, which will one day come. And this is why it was so important that Lazarus was completely and undeniable dead. So that when Jesus raised him from the dead, his absolute power *over* death could be clearly seen and understood.

Now, understand: the life to which Lazarus was raised that day, was the same kind of life that he’d had before he died. That is, regular human life, just like you and I have. This was *not* the glorified resurrection life that Jesus received with His resurrection; and which you and I will receive at the end of the age. But it was a *sign* that pointed toward that resurrection life that’s coming; because Jesus had the power to raise Lazarus back to his human life... He has the power to raise Lazarus, and you, and me, to never-ending resurrection life, sometime in the future.

So, even though Lazarus would eventually die again, and be returned one day to his tomb, everybody now knew that that death was *not* the end of the story! Never again would death have the *final* word... that word belongs to Almighty God, and He says that Lazarus, and us, will one day share in eternal life in His kingdom.

And at the end of the day, that truth is what we proclaim on All-Saints’ Sunday... and every other day of the year. Not that we live, and die, and then exist only in peoples’ memories; but that we live, and die, *and will one day live again* by the grace and power of our Heavenly Father. That’s the hope of the Christian gospel; that’s the hope that Jesus demonstrated to Mary, and Martha, and Lazarus; and that’s the hope that we now share... as we, in our own lives, seek to follow Jesus with our heart, mind, and body.

Our destiny is not a tomb, or a grave, or a mausoleum in some lonely cemetery. Like Lazarus, we, too, will be smelling like a rose... in the unending glory of our Lord’s newly created kingdom! May we take our stand on that glorious promise, and live each day in the hope that we find there. For that is our quest... and that is our life.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.