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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, March 26, 2023

5 Lent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#)

[Romans 8:6-11](#)

[John 11:1-45](#)

[Psalm 130](#)

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One of the things I find most poignant in this story of Lazarus is how it reminds us that death stinks.

Figuratively, of course; death is terrible. But also literally. Jesus suggests they open the tomb and Martha, the pragmatic one, points out that that may not be a good idea. “Lord, there is a stench, because he has been dead four days.” Lazarus is dead and the processes of biology are taking their course. The body his friends and sisters have loved and cherished, hugged and kissed, is beginning to degrade in a way that is completely natural and also completely upsetting and heartbreaking, returning to the organic elements from which it is made.

Soon of course we will hear of another burial, that of Jesus himself. And it is no accident that Jesus' friends will want to bury him with spices, fresh-smelling spices to help combat the inevitable odor of death. Probably Lazarus' friends buried him with spices as well. But there is a limit to what spices can cover. And there is something about this ultimate indignity of the smell of death that I think points us to what it is to be human, to be mortal. Consider how rare are the times, when we are alive, when we willingly let others smell the natural smells of our bodies—and how much intimacy those moments presume. A parent lovingly changes a diaper for a young child who is still dependent. A lover might perhaps inhale the beloved's sweaty smell and in the right mood might even find it profoundly delightful. To smell and be smelled is an act of great vulnerability and openness to the other. Outside those contexts of deep intimacy, the accidental body odor or bad breath or fart is a source of embarrassment. A breach of the social contract we have with one another not to get too close, too embodied, too vulnerable.

But then we may find ourselves in situations where the adult control over our bodies and our smells we once took for granted are taken away. When others must care for our bodily needs. As we age many of us will experience those situations in different ways. And of course in the end when we die all of us will forever cede control over our bodies to others, others who must clean us up and put us into our shrouds or caskets. Today in our culture the bodily tasks of death are mostly handled offstage by professionals. In the time and place of Jesus and Lazarus, Martha and Mary, they would have been more familiar to everyone as death happened at home.

Death stinks. It stinks literally, and it stinks figuratively. To give over those we love, and at length to give over our own selves, to that force that robs us of our living bodies which are all we are and have in this world, is a wrenching grief. And this is one of the other things I find most poignant in this story: it reminds us that death is worth crying about.

“Jesus began to weep.” Or as the old King James version simply has it, “Jesus wept”; the shortest verse in the Bible. Here is Jesus, about to perform the greatest of all his great signs, about to reverse the force of death itself. He has already told his disciples he plans to do it. And still he weeps.

What does it mean that Jesus who is life itself, who holds power over life and death, whom death itself cannot hold, still finds this death worthy of weeping about? Does he weep for his friends Martha and Mary and for their grief? Does he weep for Lazarus, cold and alone in the tomb? Does he weep, perhaps, in part for himself, looking ahead to a time too close at hand when he will struggle in prayer in a garden and long to be released from his own battle with death? Maybe all of these, I imagine. But I imagine that it is more than that, and also simpler than that. I imagine that Jesus cries over this death because death is simply worth crying over; because death is loss, and death is tragedy. And I find it priceless, and too great a mystery to understand, that the one who has power even to undo death nevertheless takes time to linger over that tragedy and that it sends even him who is life itself into tears. That if Jesus is truly the living icon of God, that we have a God who does not meet our grief with “Don’t cry! It’s all going to be all right.” That this tender God, even when all things will indeed be restored and made right, still finds our tears precious, and joins us in them.

Death stinks. And death is worth crying about. And now we are ready to look death straight in the eye as we journey with Jesus into the struggle ahead, into the Holy Week that awaits us, into the transformation he undertakes for us. A transformation that gathers up all our humanity, our vulnerability, our undignified flesh, and makes it holy. A transformation that has space forever for our tears and counts each one precious. A transformation that is not the avoidance of death but the journey into it, and God's faithfulness to carry us through it with Jesus to the life that awaits.