

I have a stinky story to tell you today. I'm talking putrid, smelly—not something you would want to experience with all FIVE of your senses. And today's message is this: only one step is required to **leave the stink behind**.

What's so smelly today? Not so far from HERE is a tomb. And if we were worshiping THERE today, what you would smell is four-days-dead, the body of Jesus' friend Lazarus.

Now don't get me wrong. We LOVE Lazarus. Most of us even love his tomb. But something smells there. And, like Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha, we recognize that Christ Jesus is in our midst HERE today, in our new worship space at our new worship time, in our new worship place. There certainly is no malodorous winds HERE. Immanuel Chapel at Virginia Theological Seminary is an exceedingly lovely space, sweet-smelling, even. But our hearts, like the hearts of the dead man's sisters, might just be grieving today. Yes, Christ Jesus is HERE, finally, at long last. But where has he been these four days? And what IS that odor over THERE?

Like Mary in today's gospel lesson, we have a few questions for our good friend, our Messiah, Christ Jesus. "Where have you BEEN?" we might demand to know. "Why are we HERE?" we accuse. "And what IS this smell?" We might even dare to add, "If I were running the universe, nothing would smell bad, ever!"

("No more crying there; no more dying there—we are off to see the king!" Do you hear music?)

I don't, at least not now. I'm too upset with all the changes required to avoid that bad odor. I'm too depressed to sing; just let me stand here and ignore the odor wafting in. Just let me edit the odor out of my memories.

In that vein, let me remind you: As delightful as last Sunday's festivities were, just under the surface of our reality is death, a tomb, and the stench of dying. But—don't get me wrong—WE are not dying, not today, unless we curl up, give up, and just rot. Not unless we decide we've died. No, our church community has a very pleasant aroma: new life, satisfaction, and joy.

So, what do WE say to Christ Jesus, here in our midst today? Not "Where have you been?" Not, "If you had been here we would not have died such a stinky death." NO! We say, "Welcome, Jesus. We



know you are our Messiah. We know that you bring new life. We know there is no decay in you. And we know you are here with us, just as you were there with Lazarus in his smelly tomb.”

That’s what Mary and Martha SHOULD have said to Jesus. As well as, “We love our brother Lazarus and have entrusted him to you and to our heavenly father. We KNOW that, since you allow death, you also will somehow provide for new life for US. In a new and unexpected way.”

But perhaps this was too forward-thinking to judge Mary and Martha by. THEY didn’t KNOW what we know. Perhaps, since we KNOW this Lazarus story, since we KNOW this JESUS story, we have no business expecting Mary and Martha to have gotten past their grief, gotten past the odor of death, gotten to a place of understanding that we enjoy today, in hindsight.

“But why,” I argue in response, was a **Roman Centurion** and not his good friends Mary and Martha able to say to Jesus, “Just speak the word and my servant will be healed?” And WHY was a Syrophenician woman, of all people, able to ask for mere “crumbs” instead of the whole loaf?

(Look around you: These are mighty fine “crumbs!”)

So, you may be wondering right about now, “What does all this have to say about All Saints Sunday?” There are many explanations of All Saints Sunday. The most basic is that this day gives us HOPE: hope that when today’s reality smells, we are one mere step from a whole new reality. And All Saints Sunday reminds us that there is an uncountable number of people who have each completed their life’s journey who are invisibly surrounding us, urging us on cheering us on, and praying us on saying, “Get out of the tomb!” They say, “We are waiting for you.” They tell us, “But first Christ Jesus has a job for you to do, and surely will be needing you if that mission ever gets done.”

(Do you hear music again? But maybe you don’t know THIS hymn...)

I’ve been thinking a lot this week about “life work,” the mission we are given to do while we are here. My theory, see, is that Mary and Martha were being prepared, given PRACTICE, being prepared to enter a smelly tomb despite their fears about bad odors. I think they were being prepared for a future mission—if you can think of any OTHER tomb with a three-day-dead person inside that needed people to visit and enter. (I know: You’ll say that OTHER instance featured another Mary and another Martha. Well, you have your theory and I have mine; just sayin’.) In any event, this was a faith-building exercise for big things ahead. “Back from the dead? SURE,” Mary and Martha and Lazarus and EVERYONE ELSE there that day might say, “because we have seen this before. Have we told you about Lazarus?”

There Lazarus was, in his tomb, dead. Emitting by a bad odor. Abandoned by all because was, well, stinking. Lazarus was so DEAD, according to John's gospel, that he smelled very bad.

I've met others, in person, who were in their stinky **death-tomb** and were very much alive, though. For example, a man named Johnny (may he rest in peace), who became a meth addict while in middle school. He died a few years ago, an on-the-street homeless person who succumbed to his addiction. Recently, among the few belongings he left behind, his siblings discovered a list he had made assessing his situation. On the plus side was one word, "hope." That's it: just "hope." On the negative side was a long list that included: No home; not being able to see my children; my need for krank (the street name for the drug he was addicted to); how I have disappointed my parents and, parenthetically, my desire to see them again (see "hope").

As shocking as this observation may be, to some, Johnny is now among the great cloud of witnesses. I believe he is there with his parents, all three of them urging every addict to do what Lazarus did, take that first step out of his smelly tomb when Jesus called him (as he calls us), "Come out."

- Come out of the tomb, even if we love the tomb, have great memories of the tomb.
- Come out of the stink, even if we have lived among the smell so long we don't even recognize that a smell exists.
- Come out of death, into life, both here in this life and in the life beyond.

"No more crying [here;] no more dying [here]—leave the stink behind; we are off to see the king!"