



“The Smell of New Life”

John 11:1-44
March 22, 2026

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I don't know about you, but I just love a happy ending. I love it when everything is resolved for the good. When the happy couple is reunited, when friends rediscover their bond, when a fractured family is brought back together. Who doesn't love a happy ending?

And this story provides one for the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

For a while, the happy ending looks to be in jeopardy. Jesus gets word that his dear friend Lazarus is ill. And what does he do?

Nothing.

He brushes off the message, saying something like “This illness doesn't lead to death.” Curious, isn't it? After receiving this anguished summons, Jesus stays where he is for two more days before heading off to Bethany.

When Jesus finally arrives, it's all over. Lazarus has been dead for several days.

Martha comes out to greet Jesus and gives him a piece of her mind, “Lord, if you had gotten off your you-know-what, Lazarus would still be alive!”

Jesus says, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha replies, “Yeah, yeah. Whatever.” She doesn't want some pious talk about “He's in a better place.” “Martha, this is God's will.” No, she wants her brother back.

Then Jesus says, “I am the resurrection. I am the life...”

I grew up in church, and I was told what that means. The basic idea is that those who accept Jesus as Lord and savior receive a ticket for eternal life. Later on, when we need it, we can present it at the heavenly gates and gain entrance into heaven. In the meantime, all we have to do to secure our place is to believe in Jesus.¹

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, p. 67.

But there's a problem with that interpretation. Jesus isn't talking about some abstract theology of the resurrection. He doesn't say to Martha "Lazarus is with God. You'll see him again in heaven." No, he says, "I am resurrection. I am life..."

He's speaking in the present tense.

Evidently, when it comes to resurrection and new life, there is no waiting. It's available to us here. Now.

That's good news.

And the story just gets better from there. The group tramps out to the cemetery and Jesus calls out to Lazarus, and he comes out of the tomb. Alive.

It's one heck of a happy ending. Lazarus is reunited with his family and friends. Time for a big party – a grand celebration.

Except. What's that smell? It's rather unpleasant. It smells like something dead and rotting.

I'm not one to point fingers but I think it might be Lazarus.

Yes, I am more than little fixated on the smell. The Bible is clear and unambiguous on this point. Lazarus stinks. The Bible doesn't say that the stench ever disappears.

Can you imagine it? He's alive but he smells like death. And I'm betting he doesn't look too good either. A trifle decomposed.

His sisters – they are glad he is alive – and they dearly want to give him a big hug, but they just can't bear to be that close to him.

After a few weeks of living with stinky old Lazarus, I wonder if Martha ever reconsidered her request.

This isn't what she had in mind – not at all – she wants things back the way they used to be.

If there's anyone in this drama who deserves our pity, it is Lazarus. What kind of life is there for him? He's the sole survivor. The one who cheated death. Lazarus has been given a new chance, a second go at things. But the new life isn't going to be the same as the old one.

In his old life, he didn't stink. In his old life, people didn't treat him like a circus freak. In his old life, he wasn't one big sermon illustration.

This isn't just an issue for Lazarus. In theory, it's our issue as well. Jesus is very clear that the new life offered to Lazarus is available to us. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection. I am the life." Not later but right now. We can hook up with that newness of life while we live.

The only question is, do we want to? Do you really want to take part in something that can be kind of stinky?

There are folks out there who will tell you that a life with God is easy and sweet smelling. Profess your faith in Jesus Christ and you will be happy and prosperous. Don't believe it. Embracing the new life that Jesus offers is hard, messy, complicated work. It's like childbirth – there's a lot of groaning and screaming and agony as well as joy and hope and promise.

There's nothing easy about it. Nothing easy at all.

There is this now over 20-year-old documentary called 9/11. It is the work of two French brothers who had been filming the firefighters of New York City's Engine 7, Ladder 1. It was luck really that placed one of the brothers with the company as they entered the north tower of the World Trade Centers that day. I will never forget the images that they captured of the firefighters who survived the collapse of the tower – the men and women who emerged alive from a tomb of death – covered in dirt and dust and debris. Feeling grateful to be alive. Feeling guilty to be alive. Changed. Altered. They had been to hell and back, they had been given a second chance, and they would never be the same again.

New life is never easy.

It was in the early days of her sobriety. And she missed her old life. She missed the feel of the glass in her hand, the amber color of the Scotch, the hard, sharp smell of it, the way it felt as the bitter taste hit the back of her throat. She missed the rituals associated with drinking - the water stains on the wooden tables of her favorite bar, the way the bartender always greeted her by name. Intellectually, she knew that drinking would lead to death, but she couldn't yet see the shape of the new life that sobriety offered.

New life is never easy.

It's as true for nations as it is for people. Just look at countries that try to shape a new future after years of repression and violence and chaos. Nation building is hard – whether the nation in question is Bosnia, South Africa or Syria. Whenever a people have experienced years of death and deprivation, building a new future is arduous and awkward and it never goes as well as it seems it should.

New life is never easy.

Just ask the earliest Christians. They were distrusted by the Romans because their allegiance to their resurrected Lord superseded their loyalty to the Roman Empire. They broke all the rules of polite society – gathering together people of different classes, occupations, backgrounds and genders. Is it any wonder that they were persecuted? So, if you wanted to be a Christian in those days, you had to be willing to cut yourself off from your non-Christian family and friends and live like a fugitive, practicing your faith in secret.

New life is never easy. It's messy – complicated.

Why embrace it? Why not stay in the comfort of the known? Where everything smells nice and nothing ever changes?

I don't blame you if you want to get as far away from this resurrection stuff as you can.

It is an extraordinary claim that I admit. It has long been the claim of the people of God that this stinky new life is better than the old one. ...that there is nothing better than a life of faithfulness. ...that the best possible life is one in which we have let die all those things that separate us from God. ...that the best possible life is one in which we stick as close to the crucified and resurrected one as we possibly can.

I've always wondered what happens to Lazarus, Mary and Martha. Maybe they learn to live with the smell. Maybe they get creative with air-fresheners. Maybe they decide that at the end of the day the smell is a small price to pay for life. Abundant life. Life together. Life with God.

It was Easter morning a few years ago in a sanctuary very much like this one. It was early – the main lights were off. The choir was practicing their Easter anthem. A woman, a longtime church member, had arrived early. She was sitting in an empty pew listening to the choir. I walked by and looked at her face. It was shining, transformed, and transfigured. She looked as though she had just unwrapped the one perfect gift – the one that she had ached for, longed for every day of her life. I wondered what the cause of such joy could be. A new grandchild was my guess. I caught her eye and asked her, “What’s up with you?”

She said, “Amy, Christ is risen. Christ is risen.

“We don’t have to wait until we die to embrace the new life offered to us by Jesus. We don’t even have to wait the two weeks until Easter. It is available to us. Here. Now. In all of its complicated, smelly, joy filled, hope giving glory.

Christ is risen.

Christ is risen, indeed.

Amen.