

Fifth Weekend in Lent (RCL/C): "The Fragrance of Love"

Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

April 2-3, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

What are the smells, fragrances, odors that transport you back in time and space? The smell of heavy exhaust takes me back to my seminary dorm in New York City. There wasn't air-conditioning, so I kept the windows open in the summer. That should've been okay on the third floor, but it was a narrow street, hemmed in by buildings, and tour buses would idle there while passengers visited Riverside Church on the other side of me. A happier olfactory memory is the smell of Red Rose tea in my Aunt Flo's walk-in pantry in Yonkers. My Grandma lived with her so the fragrance of tea takes me on a trip down memory lane with two of my favorite people in the whole world. (Maybe that's why I'm a tea and not a coffee drinker!)

My Mom Mimi wore the perfume Cabochard. My sister remembers our mother Georgia wearing Chanel No. 5. We could be anywhere in the world, get a whiff of those fragrances and experience a sensory reunion with our loved ones. I'm thinking the fragrance of nard must have had the same after-effect on the folks attending the party Martha and Mary threw as a Welcome Back from the Dead celebration for their brother Lazarus and as a Thank You to Jesus who had called him back to life from death.

We're talking a crazy amount of perfume in this Gospel: 1 pound, St. John tells us! (As a point of comparison, this little bottle holds .17 oz.... 16 oz. in a pound, so multiply this amount about 80 times to imagine how much fragrance was on hand. No wonder the whole "*house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume*"! (John 12:3) Mary **bathed** Jesus' feet with the nard, getting them so wet she felt compelled to dry them with the only thing close at hand: her hair. We can only **imagine** the looks on the faces of the others who looked on. They had never seen anything like it. They would never see anything like it again.

Maybe those who knew Mary well weren't completely surprised, though. She was a little out there, especially compared to her practical, no-nonsense sister Martha. (In St. Luke's Gospel we're told how Mary would sit at the Lord's feet, soaking up whatever He was saying, aggravating to no end Martha

who was looking for her to help put lunch on the table! Luke 10:38-42) Mary was definitely more the introvert of the two. When their dear family friend Jesus belatedly answers the call to come and heal Lazarus, arriving three days **after** Lazarus died, it's Martha who goes out to greet him. He tells her:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they died, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

(John 11:25-26)

Martha then goes back into the house and tells her sister, *"The Teacher is here and is calling for you."* (John 11:28c) Martha wants to raise Mary out of the depths of her grief, and knows that taking her to the Lord is the best way.

Mary goes with Martha, kneels at Jesus' feet, and greets Him the same way Martha had: *"Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died."* (John 11:32) (I hear it as both a vote of confidence and an accusation.) Then Mary cries. Everyone with her cries. And Jesus cries. (Shortest verse in all of Scripture, John 11:35.) Jesus has the mourners show Him where Lazarus' body is laid. The ground in Israel was too hard and rocky to bury people, so instead they were laid in caves, with huge stones placed to block the entrance to the tomb. Jesus commands that the stone be removed. Ever-practical Martha is alarmed: "Lord, the smell!" Jesus counters, *"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"* (John 11:40)

And indeed they all did see the glory of God. *"Lazarus, come out!"* (John 11:43c) Out he came, still wrapped in the winding cloths of death, freed by friends who unspooled the linen strips, revealing the Lazarus they thought they knew and loved, yet a Lazarus who could never have been the same after what occurred in that tomb. Lazarus was like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. And his sisters' awe, wonder, gratitude at this "gift given" left them transformed as well. Martha expresses her thanks through the meal she prepares, and Mary shows hers in the loving devotion with which she pours perfume over Jesus' feet, anointing and massaging them.

I know at least some of you have experienced the bliss of massage, the deep relaxation that comes when tired muscles, tight shoulders, aching back, sore feet are kneaded, softened, soothed with strong yet

tender touch and fragrant lotion or warm oil. Jesus' feet must have been mightily calloused with the countless miles He had walked with His disciples back and forth from Galilee to Judea. Mary loved the man by loving His feet, feet which in six days' time would be crossed at the ankles and nailed to a cross, perched on a block to keep His body from slipping down during the hours of crucifixion. Jesus is aware that His death is near, because when Judas natters on from the sidelines, when he hypocritically complains that the perfume should have been sold to provide for the poor, Jesus snaps back, *"Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial."* (John 12:7)

Jesus' death is life for us. Jesus' calling of Lazarus back from the dead to this life foreshadows Jesus' Father in Heaven's resurrection of Him from death to everlasting Life. The risen Lord will be the most glorious butterfly emerging from the chrysalis of graveclothes and of the tomb to a risen Life He shares with us. In this weekend's lesson from Paul's letter to the Philippians, we read, *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...."* (Phil. 3:10) Paul didn't just mean **later**. He meant **now**. He knew our Lord Jesus Christ wants to share His risen life with us **now**, not just **later**, not just after physical death.

Our Lenten e-devotions include stories from those who have first-hand experience of being raised from the dead on this side of the grave. Most recently our church friend Mary Reilly wrote on March 31:

At points in my younger adulthood I had "gained the whole world" but I was, to use a term I recently read: "winning but lost." This is when you look like you have it all but you feel empty. No amount of food, drink, fun, travel, money, therapy or anything else is going to fill the void. I was spiritually bereft. I believed in God but I did not have faith. I thought I loved God but I didn't even love myself.

I found out that you stop desperately yearning and aching for something—anything—to fill the void and stop the suffering only when you LET GO and trust in Him.

Our Lord Jesus called on Martha and Mary to **trust in Him** in their moment of deepest disappointment that He hadn't shown up sooner and in their deepest grief over Lazarus' death:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they died, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."
(John 11:25-26)

What better mantra can there be than, *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...."*?

If you wake up in the morning feeling fearful or anxious about what your day may hold, whisper this

prayer: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...."* If you find yourself in a stressful situation at home or at work or at school, on the road or playing field or in the midst of a meeting, silently call on Heaven: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...."* If you're beside yourself with physical pain or emotional turmoil, focus on these words: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...."* If you can't fall asleep at night and neither counting sheep nor counting blessings is helping to lull your racing mind, pray this over and over: *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...."*

There are many Lazaruses among us, who have been raised from a living death; we count on them to share their sacred story and deepen our faith that all things are possible with God, that if we believe we **will** see the glory of God. There are many Mary's among us whose extravagant acts of devotion are fueled by deep love and unending gratitude and who inspire us to greater passion for God. There are many Martha's among us who express their heartfelt thanks through practical deeds of service and who challenge us to live lives of faith active in love. There are also many Judases in this world who will play the role of cynic and snipe from the sidelines. Ignore them.

The perfume of lilies, any time of year, transports me to Easter. Wherever we go and whatever we do, may the fragrance of love of God and love of neighbor, surround us and linger after us. Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham