

## SERMON FOR LENT 5A BIRKENHEAD

Have you ever been in the garden and come across a bird or a mouse a cat has killed and left? Not a pleasant smell, is it? If you've lived in the country and smelt a dead cow or sheep you'll know how horrid this can be. It's enough to make your stomach turn. I'm sorry. I should have given a warning before this sermon like they do on TV. This sermon contains material that some people may find offensive. We advise discretion.

The smell of the dead can be offensive. That's why Martha and Mary tried to stop Jesus having the tomb of Lazarus opened. After four days he would smell. It would be unbearable. No Jesus, don't roll the stone away. Leave things as they are. We wouldn't cope if you opened the grave.

Jesus knew that unless the smell was confronted, unless the reality was dealt with, there would be no new life for Lazarus.

2

It's much easier to leave the stone over the tomb of those things we don't want to confront. Better to leave them dead and buried so we don't smell the stench. Opening up some issues would cause an overwhelming stench. So we don't face things by keeping the stone firmly in place over the tombs of those things we prefer to forget. Maybe its division in our family, or something we have done in the past. Perhaps its bicultural issues or the political situation. Is it the changes which continually go on in our church, locally, nationally or internationally? We all have things we don't want to face and we keep them hidden away. We keep a large stone in front of these tombs.

3

So often the scriptures suggest that the way we deal with things is not the way God does. God is always seeking to bring life. Ezekiel had a vision of the valley of dry bones coming to life because God breathed life into them. Then Ezekiel is able to say God will do the same for the nation of Israel. God says "I am going to open the dead places in you, and raise you from those dead places. I shall put my spirit in you and you shall live." Then the gospel gives us such a vivid demonstration of this when Jesus opens up the grave of Lazarus and raises him from death. Jesus opens up those smelly places where dead things lie. And he does that in order to bring new life.

4

It's interesting to notice how Jesus prepares each of the sisters for the demonstration of new life he will bring. Martha comes to him and says "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Jesus then proceeds to have a logical conversation with her about her views on the resurrection. This ends with the wonderful statement "I am the resurrection and the life. " And Martha believes he is the Christ.

Mary comes to Jesus and asks exactly the same question. "If you had been here my brother would not have died." Although she used the same question, the response was different. Jesus said "Where have you put him?" "Lord come and see." Jesus wept.

5

Jesus prepares each sister in an appropriate way for facing the dead. Is one ever prepared for such an event? New life can sometimes burst in on us without preparation. Sometimes new life is something we must actively seek.

But the gospel is clear. New life is to be our aim. Whatever we shut away, whatever we don't want to face, whatever "smells" for us, maybe we can ask God to help us open up these dead places in us that we too might have new life. Can we say with Jesus "Roll away the stone"? Can we call out the command, "Come out!" Do that and you will live. Do that, and others will live with you.