

Introduction for this fifth Sunday in Lent: The phrase “elephant in the room” describes our inability or unwillingness to acknowledge something significant— if not huge— that’s in our midst. The elephant in the room at Lazarus’ house in Bethany is death. We can smell it in the precious oil Mary uses to anoint Jesus. Professor Emerson Powery reminds us that death’s lurking about is meant to invite us to examine what really matters.

John 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”

“Death crashes the party”

The guest of honour used to be dead and now he’s not. One of the hosts breaks open perfume valued at a year’s wages and slathers it on Jesus’ feet.

The aroma fills the house and invades the nostrils, fills the lungs and floods the senses....the smell is cloying and designed to cover the smell of decay... the ointment’s purpose is to prepare a body for burial. What a macabre dinner party!

Most of us avoid thinking or talking about death—religious leaders are no exception. During our year of clinical training to become chaplains, we began teasing each other about our avoidant behaviour...”Did you say the ‘d-word’?”

Like it or not, death crashes the party-

Death lurks at this feast where Lazarus is the guest of honour. Days before Lazarus was mouldering in his grave reeking of death. Now, he is alive and feasting.

But death lurks just around the corner— Read ahead and you learn that religious authorities have put a price on Lazarus’ head. The plot to kill Jesus has already been uncovered. As one writer puts it, Jesus knew he would be laid in a grave because he liberated Lazarus from his.

John telegraphs death’s nearness by saying Passover is soon. Passover is about death. First born children die and slaves escape Egypt. Lambs are sacrificed. One Passover early in Jesus’ ministry—as John tells it—Jesus topples tables, and chases out the changers of money. He speaks then of his own death. When Jesus feeds the crowds about the time of Passover, he speaks of giving his life for the sake of the world. Even as people are fed, death’s spectre looms.

Death looms over our lives too. Earlier this week, the church commemorated the priest and poet John Donne. You might have learned lines from his poem, “Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” Donne writes that the bell’s toll signals how our lives and our deaths are intertwined with everyone else’s.

How deeply do we comprehend such inter-connection in view of six million deaths world wide from the Corona virus? Do we sense it knowing that in a

month's time, just one war has claimed tens of thousands—and there are countless wars in all parts of the world? Then consider there are four million people in Ukraine alone whose lives permanently disrupted as they flee their homeland.

Our own lives carry a whiff of decay as we pray for people with life threatening or life altering illness. The aches and pains we feel serve notice that we're less mobile, the eyesight and hearing are going—maybe there are gaps in the memory too.

In our collective life, many of the social institutions we thought would last forever are showing signs of winding down—and churches provide a vivid example of what the scientists call entropy—a winding down and a tendency toward randomness. *Having fun yet?*

The people of Bhutan have a daily practice of contemplating impermanence and death. We might think such attention would make people morose. To be fair, they think we're the odd ones because we view life as a big check list of things to achieve and accomplish. The people of Bhutan are among the world's happiest because each day, they treat life as precious, not to be taken for granted.

We sort of get it. At many a funeral lunch over the last thirty years, I've heard people say, "We shouldn't wait for someone to die before we get together." Just this week someone shared with us that we shouldn't wait for someone to die to tell them we love them.

As people of faith, we give death it's due, as Shakespeare once put it. At the same time we live as hopeful people.

Jesus' promise that death doesn't have the last word isn't designed to mask death's stink or to lead us to ignore the elephant in the room.

The promise of resurrection is about God's presence with us in our despair, our languishing and our just getting by. The promise is also that not even death kills God's love. The promise of resurrection is that God intends to do infinitely more than paper over death—but to do a whole new thing and to bring new life and one day to wipe away all tears. Amen.