

Easter 3, Year C

- [Our sense of smell is really kind of miraculous, when you think about it]
- When you smell something, it is because tiny particles, small enough to be missed by a microscope, have traveled through the air and drifted or been inhaled into your nose
- These particles travel in your nasal cavity to something called the olfactory bulb: a structure of nerves where the particles fit into corresponding nerve endings and then are sent to tangled bundles of nerves called glomeruli which then relay a signal to the rest of your brain
- There are over 1,000 of these glomeruli, so the combination of which of them get triggered is why we're pretty good at identifying smells – though not nearly as good as dogs, who have almost five times as many
- And when these smell signals get sent to the rest of the brain, they don't merely go to the part of the brain that decodes these impulses in order to identify what it is that we're smelling
- The olfactory bulb is part of the limbic system, the system that controls things like behavior, like emotion, like motivation – so these nerve impulses go to the amygdala and the hippocampus, parts of the brain that deal with emotions, with associations, with mood
- While most of us may not always bring this up at dinner parties, this is something we all know – something we know deep down, in our bones
- You know what it's like to smell something familiar – something you can't quite place, can't quite identify, but still evokes a powerful emotion reaction – when the name for what you're smelling feels like it's on the tip of your tongue, or tickling the back of your mind, and yet you still know exactly how it makes you feel – still can feel your mood change in an instant, just based on that smell
- And you know what it's like to have a smell come along and actually transport you to another time, another place, maybe one you hadn't thought of for ages – the smell of something your mother used to bake, maybe – or the flowers at your wedding – or the constellation of smells that your nose tells your brain means you're home
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- This is because of the way our brains process smells
- And while John the Evangelist, who wrote the story we just heard of the Crucified and Risen Christ appearing to the disciples – probably didn't know all of the chemistry of the brain – just like those of us who didn't know it yesterday, he could not have been unaware

of the effect smells have on human beings

- Which is why I think that John is very intentional about a word he uses here, today, in our Gospel, when the disciples see Jesus again, in this Resurrection appearance
- When they realize it's Jesus and finally make it to shore, they find Jesus there, with fish he appears to have already caught for the occasion, cooking them on a fire
- But that's the thing: to John this isn't just any fire – the Greek word John uses (ἀνθρακιῶν) is the word for a heap of coals – the translation we read calls it a “charcoal fire”
- And it's not exactly a common Greek word – in fact it occurs only one other place in Scripture, and that place is just a few chapters earlier in John – chapter 18, to be precise, one of the chapters we read not too long ago, on Good Friday
- Do you remember the fire – the charcoal fire – we heard about that day?
- It was the fire around which Peter stood, with another unnamed disciple, and with slaves and police
- It was the fire around which Peter was trying to warm himself as he denied Jesus three times – it was the smell of burning charcoal that hung in the air when the cock crowed, and he realized that Jesus was right, and he had done something – three times he'd done something! – that would haunt him forever
- To Peter, then, that smell was the smell of guilt, of his own betrayal of his Lord and God – the smell of his lowest moment, his greatest shame
- Can you imagine how Peter felt then, in that horrible moment?
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- And can you imagine how he must feel, when he reaches land, sees that his Redeemer lives, and the scent lingering in the air, assaulting his nostrils, is that one – the smell of a burning heap of coals that might as well be piled on top his conscience
- Can you imagine how it feels for Peter to see Jesus again, but to have that smell lingering, not allowing him to enjoy that, but instead to relive the worst, most shameful moment of his life?
- To have that scent hanging in the air all through breakfast, haunting Peter as only smells can – putting him right back around that other, similar fire, trying to swallow with such a lump in his throat
- Because it's not until after breakfast, we're told, that this conversation with Jesus ensues
- This one where Jesus asked him the same question three times: “Peter, do you love me?”
- Three times he's given the chance to affirm his Lord and Savior, where before he denied

him

- For each denial, an opportunity
- And as he does this, the exact same smell is in the air: the smell of burning charcoal
- Peter is living this moment while being forced to relive that one – the smell brings these two moments together, in his mind, and allow him to truly claim what Jesus is offering: redemption
- Redemption from that point that seemed lower than Peter ever thought he would be
- Freedom from that terrible thing he did that was heavy on his conscience, weighing him down
- The chance to let go of the thing that was haunting him – because Jesus didn't just ignore it, didn't just pretend it never happened, but offered Peter the chance to really **know** it was forgiven and not merely forgotten
- Jesus makes a number of post-Resurrection appearances in Scripture, but I have to say this one is probably my favorite
- We say during Easter that we are people of the Resurrection, that we need to look for signs of Resurrection and proclaim Resurrection to the world because the world so desperately needs to hear it
- That may be easier said than done, sometimes – ‘what does the Resurrection look like?’ we might wonder
- It can look like a lot of different things – there are so many stories of redemption – of freedom – of grace
- And we should keep asking that question, ‘what does the Resurrection look like?’
- But I think I know what it smells like