

+ 2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6 + Big Words of Easter: Confidence + 3rd Sunday of Easter + 10 April 2016 +

CIR HIRI!¹ Dear Fellow Followers of Our Fragrant Lord,

The sense of smell is an amazing gift from God. Not only does it enable you to rapidly detect whether a certain smell is good or bad, but your sense of smell even has the ability to stir up your emotions. You see, your sense of smell is directly connected to your memory. A whiff of a particular smell can instantly bring back a memory—good, bad, funny, sad.

For example, what comes to mind when you think of the symphony of smells from a Thanksgiving dinner or the savory smell of meat on a grill or the rich smell of warm chocolate or the earthy smells of warm soil and spring rain. Think of the fragrant tang of a pine forest on a summer day, the salty air of an ocean breeze, or the smoky odor of a campfire. Think of the difference between the smell of a baby who needs a change and a baby who just finished her bath. Certain smells may remind you of a beloved grandparent or a favorite place or an unforgettable event in your life.

Sometimes you associate a certain smell with a word or a day or a concept. For example, what smell do you associate most with Easter? Take a deep breath and the smell that may remind you most of Easter comes from these beautiful white flowers around the ambo and font—the lilies. Their strong fragrance makes a memory that comes back powerfully with one whiff.

This morning the Lord's Apostle Paul has a special aroma for us to consider. This aroma is both the fragrance of victory and the odor of defeat. You can't be neutral about this aroma that comes with Easter. You could even say that it's the aroma of true confidence, but it has nothing to do with any deodorant or body spray that claims to give you confidence. No, this aroma is the most powerful in the world and it's unforgettable.

So what kind of a smell is both the fragrance of victory and the odor of defeat? What aroma exudes true confidence? Back in the days of the Roman Empire, when the Apostle Paul lived, there was a certain event that took place in cities across the empire. It was called a "triumph" or a "**triumphal procession.**" It was a spectacle that assaulted the senses!

Imagine the scene. You're street-side along the parade route because the local Roman general just won a series of major victories. The Roman emperor has decided to honor him with this huge spectacle. At the head of the parade, your general leads with all the spoils of his victories trailing behind him. He rides a big chariot with a golden crown on his head. His soldiers wear wreaths and shout and brag loudly behind him with prisoners-of-war in tow. The most fearsome and notorious captives are at the front just to show off the victory even more. Next come banners with names of conquered nations and peoples and pictures of conquered cities, while other people display the weapons of their conquered enemies. More people follow, showing off exotic plants and animals from the conquered regions, while the most expensive plunder and statues roll by on carts.

The din of noise grows louder as trumpets and musicians play. The crowds shout and praise the victors. Bulls walk by on their way to sacrifice. All of it shows off the power and might of the Roman Empire, but what you remember most is the smell—the overpowering, sweet smell of flowers. You've brought flowers, like everyone else, to shower upon your champion general. Flowers are flying everywhere. Flowers line the streets so it smells like you're standing in the middle of a field of sweet-smelling orchids. Meanwhile the local temples burn large amounts of fragrant incense to the gods who granted victory. The entire town is bathed in the flowery fragrance of victory and confidence in Rome's power, but for the chained captives, it's the odor of death. Rome's victory flowers mean execution is coming.

Perhaps he had recently witnessed one of these triumphal processions while in northern Greece. They were common occurrences after one of Rome's many victories. We don't know if he did, but we do know that that aromatic spectacle of a Roman triumph was on Paul's mind when he wrote the words before us to the Corinthian Christians. ***"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of***

¹ "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" This is known as the *Paschal Greeting*, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, "*Christ is risen!*", they automatically respond loudly and boldly, "*He is risen indeed!*"

death; to the other, the fragrance of life.” What kind of aroma is both the fragrance of victory and the odor of death? What aroma exudes real confidence? Christ!

Now spiritually-speaking, you and I don’t smell that good. Your sins stink and so do mine. You and I reek with selfishness and self-centered pride and self-interest and self-promotion. We try to cover up the stink of our selfish sins with the aromatic appearance of confidence, but it doesn’t take long before our words and actions reveal how rotten things really are on the inside. You and I are supposed to be fragrant and pleasing to God, but our sins fill his nostrils with an awful stench.

Think back on your life. Can you recall words or actions or thoughts that make you cringe and hold your nose like you’ve just smelled rotten eggs? Can you recall times in your life when what you’ve said or done has turned another person off to Christ with the foul odor of sin? The holy God should sentence us to eternity in the rotten stench of hell, but he does not!

Why? Recall Paul’s words! **“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ...”** Now you could look at the life of our Savior Jesus and you could jump to the conclusion that his life was covered with the stink of defeat. He was born and raised in deep poverty. He never had a permanent place to lay his head. His followers were pretty rough around the edges and included society’s rejects and radicals. He didn’t hang out with the high and mighty, but with the lowly and the weak, the outcast and the sinner. He was betrayed by his own, abandoned by the rest, and sentenced unjustly to a criminal’s death. He seemed to lose everything as his own followers hid behind locked doors, but in all of that Jesus was actually winning a war!

The aroma of Jesus’ life and suffering and death seemed like the stink of defeat, when it was really the sweet fragrance of victory, but how could that be? Step into the empty tomb, look back, and you will see. The tomb is empty because death could not hold Jesus in its foul, flesh-rotting grasp. Instead the risen Jesus stands victorious with death and its master Satan dragging in chains in his wake. The cross is a symbol of victory not defeat because Jesus offered himself as the sweet-smelling sacrifice for all your sins and mine. His life was not one great loss, but the victory of God’s own chosen Substitute in your place. So Christ risen and victorious **“leads us in triumphal procession.”** For death and Satan and sin, Jesus is **“the smell of death,”** but for us, whom he rescued, Jesus is **“the fragrance of life.”**

Now **“through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of”** Christ. **“We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.”** That means that that aromatic spectacle of Christ’s Easter victory goes out through you and me to the ends of the earth. For many out there, what you and I have to share is **“the smell of death.”** For many, the aroma of Christ is a disgusting stench from which people turn their noses. Think of it like this. Has there ever been a smell that you once loved, but now you detest because you got sick once after enjoying it or you smelled it too much at work? That’s how the aroma of Christ is to those who are perishing in guilt and unbelief. They appear confident in themselves, all while ignoring the spiritual rot happening in their own hearts.

To many others, however, what you and I have to share is **“the fragrance of life.”** It’s like walking into this sanctuary on Easter morning and the lily blossoms have opened up. You can’t help, but be excited at that fragrant reminder that Jesus lives and has conquered death and therefore has given you life. Christ is the fragrant aroma of guilt washed away and tears wiped away, of peace for a troubled heart and the doors of heaven opened wide.

...But if you and I are to spread that aroma of Christ, **“who is equal to such a task?”** How can you and I possibly be able to do that? I mean, it’s much easier to let your own stinky sin get in the way of Christ’s fragrant aroma, isn’t it? How can you and I possibly be competent or confident for this task? Paul points us back to Christ. **“Unlike so many, we do not peddle the Word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God... Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.”** Confidence and competence come only through Christ.

Paul loved the Corinthian Christians dearly, but they had allowed some shady characters to come into their midst—men who had a rotten odor of hypocrisy and falsehood about them. They claimed to be super-apostles, greater than Paul in every way, but they were more interested in money than in the aromatic message of Christ. That wasn’t Paul, and it’s not you and me, but if we try to depend on ourselves, it turns out pretty rotten.

So how can you and I spread ***“everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ”***? Go to the source of that fragrance! Go to the Word of God in your personal devotions, in Bible study and Sunday School and teen class, here in worship. Go to the Word and see how the Lord makes you competent and confident to spread the sweet aroma of Christ. Go to the Word and see how the aroma of Christ in your daily life gives you opportunities to spread his fragrance in your God-given callings. Then with Christ making you competent, go and spread his fragrance of life so many others can join you on Christ’s triumphal procession towards heaven.

What is the fragrance of victory? What is the aroma of life eternal? What is the smell of true Easter confidence? Jesus! When you hear or read about Jesus, let that name remind you of the sweet fragrance of his victory and the glorious aroma of life eternal. Let that beautiful aroma confidently spread through you and me to the ends of the earth! **CIR HIRI!** Amen.