

The Gardener

Meditation on John 20:1-18

Easter 2016

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together; but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

My parents finally moved this week. I say, "finally," because it was something we talked about for a long time--them moving from their home in

Port Orange to a retirement community in Orange City. It was hard for them to give up their home and so many things they loved. But Dad is where he can have nursing care if he needs it, and Mom can have help caring for him. They live in a nice, little 2-bedroom cottage. They even bought new “wheels” to get to activities in their community, such as bridge, art classes, concerts and meals in their choice of restaurants. This is my brother, Steve, driving Dad in their new golf cart.

Jim and I last saw my parents on Monday--the day before their move. The packers were there and people were in almost every room of their house. And there was stuff everywhere! And Dad was in the kitchen, amidst the noise and chaos, quietly trimming dead flowers and leaves off a flower arrangement someone had given my mom. Snip snip went his little scissors. I watched him gently handle the blossoms, leaves and stems, and I remembered The Gardener of my childhood.

Dad’s been retired 25 years or more, but when he worked full time in a government office in Maryland, he would become, in the evenings and on weekends, The Gardener, caring for growing things. He grew houseplants on our large, enclosed porch -- African violets with fuzzy leaves and purple blossoms and hanging baskets of ivy, fern, spider, and wandering Jew. In winter, he kept bulbs in refrigerator drawers, nestled with onions and potatoes. He tended flowering trees and evergreens. We had azaleas and rhododendrons. He cultivated roses. We had fruit trees and a large vegetable garden, growing squash and zucchini, broccoli and beans, asparagus, peppers and tomatoes. We even had a strawberry patch for a while, and Mom made freezer jam.

When my parents moved to Florida in 1990, Dad reluctantly left the big yard “up north”--and all the physical labor that was too much for him. But

he brought with him a few plants, including a bulb in a pot that he inherited from his mother--another gardener! It hadn't bloomed in years. It looked dead, actually. It had been forgotten when Grandma's Alzheimer's disease became more advanced and taking care of Grandma was all my grandfather could do. Dad planted the bulb in his Port Orange yard, and wouldn't you know it? It bloomed the first year--a gorgeous, red amaryllis. Dad took pictures every time it bloomed and retold the story with a bemused expression.

Once dead. Now alive! And my father, even without a yard of his own, is still--at heart--The Gardener.

In our gospel reading today, Mary has an unexpected encounter with the gardener--or at least someone who looked like one--when she goes to the tomb. This is Mary from a village on the west shore of the Sea of Tiberius called Magdala and later Tarichaea, meaning "salted fish." This is the only gospel that features Mary the Magdalene alone at the tomb, but every gospel consistently features this Mary at the tomb-- looking for Jesus.

John's account of Mary the Magdalene speaking with Jesus without even knowing it is my favorite resurrection story. Let's look at John 20:15 "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'"

I don't think it's a coincidence that she supposes him to be the gardener. This tells us that he looked like an ordinary person. Even as the Risen Savior, he wasn't otherworldly looking, with light beams shooting out of

bright white garments. He was truly God who had become one of us and had come to comfort and reassure his own! We suspect that Mary didn't recognize Jesus not because he had changed so much in appearance but because she didn't expect to see him alive--not after seeing his cruel death. She doesn't have the "sight" that faith provides-- until Jesus calls her name. This brings us back to John 10:3, when Jesus says, "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." By the way, the Greek word "Rabbouni" Mary uses and John translates as "teacher" isn't just "teacher" ; the form of the word is a term of endearment, expressing affection and respect.

Finally, it is important that he looks like a gardener. We only find this "gardener" encounter in John's account. This image takes us all the way back to Genesis. After God creates by speaking into existence the heavens and the earth and forms man from dust, the Lord God becomes a gardener, so that human beings would have a beautiful place in which to live and food to eat. Genesis 2:8, "And the LORD God *planted a garden in Eden*, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed." But all along, God didn't plan to be the only gardener. He had made a companion/partner to care for and enjoy Creation with Him. Gen. 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden *to till it and keep it.*"

Before today's reading, when Jesus appears to Mary looking like a gardener, Jesus had a history with gardens, but not as someone who works the soil. On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus takes three of the disciples with him to a garden. This is what the Garden of Gethsemane looks like today. Gethsemane, a name meaning "oil press," is at the foot of the Mount of Olives across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. An ancient grove of olive trees stands to this day. In Matthew 26:36-, "Jesus went with them to a

place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’ And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.’”

The garden of prayer soon becomes a place of betrayal. Luke 22:45-48 says, “When (Jesus) got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, ‘Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.’” “While he was still speaking, suddenly a crowd came, and the one called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him; but Jesus said to him, ‘Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?’”

After Jesus dies, he is buried-- in a garden. In John 19:41-42, we read, “Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation [the day before the Sabbath] and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.” Here is an example of a garden tomb in Jerusalem. This one has been a place of pilgrimage since it was discovered in 1867, and considered by some to be the site of the burial and resurrection of Jesus. This contradicts the traditional story of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem--another site claiming to be where Jesus died and was buried. The story goes that the Emperor Constantine, who became a Christian in the 4th century, built the church on top of a temple that Emperor Hadrian built for the goddess Aphrodite in the 2nd century to cover up the cave in which Jesus was buried.

The truth is, we don't know the exact site of Jesus' tomb. It doesn't matter. What's important is what the gospels tell us-- that early on the first day of the week, when Mary and other loved ones come looking for Jesus, the stone has been mysteriously rolled away or removed. And the tomb is empty! And the place of betrayal and death has become a place of hope and promise for all people who believe on the Son.

Once dead. Now alive! Our Risen Savior come to us as one of us, but also God.

The Gardener.

Holy One, thank you for your Word that tells us the story of your Son's cruel death, though he committed no sins, but also His miraculous Resurrection-- how you raised Him from the dead. And now, by your grace, the world has the hope and promise of eternal life with You through faith in the work of Your Son for humanity's sake. Father, we could never be good enough to redeem ourselves, but knowing that and loving us so, you were willing to come and dwell with us and truly become one of us so we may be brought back into right relationship with you. Help us on this day when we celebrate your Son's triumph over the grave to be your loving, comforting presence to others in need, especially those mourning the loss of loved ones or suffering from illness or disease. Lead us to boldly share our hope with the world, proclaiming our faith through humble service and acts of compassion and love. Christ is alive! He is risen from the grave! Alleluia! Amen!

