

Easter Sermon 2020
John 20:1-18 and Colossians 3:1-4
Rev. Amy P McCullough

When my grandparents retired to Florida, the first thing they did after unpacking their suitcases was to plant a garden. They were farmers, after all, accustomed to growing their own food, and steadied by the rhythms of digging, planting, watering, and weeding. As a child, I would walk amongst the tall tomato vines; touch the strings of green beans, or watch, amazed, as my grandfather cut off a huge head of lettuce. Gardens, I quickly learned, embodied life's persistent survival. Gardens brought, in a bodily way, life's goodness; the sweet surprising tastes of what can come up from the ground.

The second time I ever visited to Grace United Methodist Church, before I officially became the Lead Pastor, I arrived for a meeting a bit early and took a stroll in the neighborhood. Without knowing beforehand my destination, I walked down to Spring Lake, where I wandered amongst the cherry blossom trees, watched the ducks poke their heads under water and saw the bright orange fish swim. This was not a food-producing garden but a respite-inviting one, with its ornamental trees, gentle waters, the space for a child to jump over the stream or plenty of grass upon which anyone could stretch out a picnic blanket. Even today my children can be calmed by the suggestion of talking a walk down to the gardens.

Gardens play a pivotal role in scripture; appearing at key moments in the story of how God persistently reaches out to humankind. The entire saga of God's life in our life begins with the Garden of Eden. This garden has every kind of tree, producing every kind of fruit, a river winding through the middle, harmonious creatures, and God walking amongst it all, as readily available as those hanging apples and waddling ducks. Nothing has ever been quite as perfect as the first green garden of goodness.

Unfortunately, terrible things also happen in the garden, with a snake sneakily planting seeds of suspicion, Eve willing to take the first bite, and Adam's complicit second one. There are lies, finger-pointing blame, failures of responsibility of our part, hurt and sadness all around. Adam and Eve are escorted to the garden's gates, told not to return. Yet even after expulsion from Eden, humankind has found itself pulled toward a garden, inclined to the acts of tending for life, survival, and making plants bloom. We have planted, watered, watched for seedlings to sprout, and gotten impatient when they didn't. We have cried at our ineptitude, sworn we'd stop trying, sat down for a while. Then we have cleared out the brush, dug again, and begun anew. A garden is a symbol of survival, nourishment, of life from which we can't ever, really, walk away.

Jesus also found himself intertwined with gardens. He taught in gardening themes: about the power of a mustard seed or the necessity of seeds finding good soil or how mercy might render a dead tree just one more chance to produce fruit. On the night before his death Jesus enters the garden of Gethsemane in order to pray, asking if he might be spared this awful cup of death and, if not, be given the strength to endure it. He remains in the garden as terrible things happen: Judas betrays him, the rest of the disciples fall

asleep, and as the guards close in, Peter runs away. This is a garden filled with horror, where the trees' shadows mock any naïve belief that the calamity might end well.

When it was all over, late in the afternoon on Friday, the small group of disciples, women mainly, needed a place to lay Jesus' body. Joseph of Arimathea along with Nicodemus, found a nearby garden. In the garden was a never-before-used tomb. I imagine a simple garden, not particularly memorable or showy with flowers, but filled with faithful perennials, those sturdy reliable plants difficult to destroy. It doesn't matter what it looked like. The selling point of this garden was its closeness, its convenience, and its ready-made tomb. And so that evening, his body wrapped in spices and cloth, Jesus was laid there.

The sun was still buried beneath the horizon when Mary Magdalene goes to the garden early Sunday morning. She had been present at his cross. She witnessed his limp body being taken down, wrapped carefully, and buried. She watched the stone be rolled into place. Now Mary Magdalene returns to the garden; her only aim to ensure his proper burial, her only hope to have a bit more space to fully grieve.

Mary does not find the garden tomb as she expected. The stone is rolled to one side. The tomb's entryway is opened. The body of Jesus is gone. And because she has witnessed enough to expect the worst, she is convinced his body has been stolen. She is certain the betrayals have continued. The indignities are never-ending. They have taken the Lord, she cries. I don't know where he is. Please, stranger gardener, tell me where to find him, so I can finish his burial.

You and I know how important it is to say good-bye. We have watched, helplessly, as people across the globe have died without loved ones present at their side over the past weeks, aching for the necessity of such isolation. We, together, have watched how indiscriminate death can be, how irrevocable and too often unjust death is. We know being confronted by death is a shock to the system; no matter how prepared we think we are. "We have learned how to revive an economy," said one doctor last week, "we do not know how to bring people back from the dead."

Like Mary Magdalene, you and I also know something of grief: how heavy its load is, what it feels like to miss someone for days, months, and years, to carry our losses like holes within our hearts. Death can be so dis-orienting – with one piling upon another – that we lose our memory of life in the garden, where God is readily present, utterly there. Standing there with a body over which to grieve, Mary feels robbed of this small consolation, betrayed of even of the proper space to grieve.

She thinks the garden holds only betrayal, death until she looks around and the clues pile together: grave cloths perfectly folded, the angels wondering why are you crying, the entryway to the tomb, open, welcoming anyone who wants to peer deep inside. And then a figure, a stranger, undisturbed by the weeping, or the graveside, says Mary. Mary. It's less the name than the way he says it, Mary, with a little lilt at the end, as if he has greeted her a thousand times over, calling her to him with closeness and love.

It's the knowing that makes Mary see what she could not see before, Rabouni, Lord, one that I love, trust, miss, and hope for. You are not dead. You have been raised.

Jesus' Resurrection is associated with all of sorts of festivities: new clothes, bursting congregations, brass instrumentalists, an altar decked out with flowers, soaring Alleluias, and children running forward in Easter finery. When the reality that this global virus was going to prompt a full-blown, protracted shutdown, one of my thoughts was "What about Easter? How are we going to have Easter?"

Then a colleague reminded me, Jesus's resurrection took place in an unremarkable garden with only one witness, someone who loved Jesus, whose heart was broken, who, at the story's beginning, stood weeping at his tomb. That's it. So here we are in the garden, where in our sorrow, confusion, wondering what tomorrow might bring, the Risen Christ comes, to remind us that God has wrestled death for all time and won. By ascending to God, Christ has moved closer to us, offering the path to an entirely new way of living, past fear, despair, rage, hopelessness into promise, purpose, and unending love. Christ is Risen. Hear his voice of love, calling out our names. Amen.