

Out of the Garden
John 20.1-18
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Easter 1A
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How do we begin to understand something that defies logic and explanation? Well, we have options. Art. Poetry. Music. Metaphor. We access “what can be known but not told,” as Joseph Campbell once put it. The gospel of John implements every poetic, metaphorical, artful tool to invite us into a way of knowing God through Christ as Word, Light, and Truth. Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is Risen indeed! Alleluia!) Today is a day for that which cannot adequately be told, and so we need to listen to the story with intent to hear. A good question to carry with us into this text may be: What is the great story of our faith inviting us to know about God, about ourselves, and about the world?

For years, my favorite way of understanding Jesus comes from St. Athanasius’ *On the Incarnation*. If you’ve spent much time with me, you’ve heard me reference this beautiful description of a portrait damaged and stained from the neglect of time. Rather than throwing the portrait away, the artist asks the subject of the portrait to come and sit for it again.

It’s a beautiful metaphor for that *imago dei* within the human creation. The image of God, the breath of creation, the thumbprint of the Divine resting within each and every human has gotten lost beneath damage and stain. Perhaps with a gentle, soft towel, the artist first cleans the canvas and removes layers of oil and dirt. With glue and tweezers she repairs the torn edges of canvas. Once the working surface is dry and clean, she calls for the subject to come back as she pulls out her paints and brushes, setting the palette with ultramarine blue, ivory black, titanium white, burnt umber, yellow ochre. She loses track of time as she brightens and lightens, bringing out definition that faded long ago, highlighting the strength of his hands and the vividness of his eyes. She works without resting until the work is finished and made right again.

Athanasius and the Johannine gospel writer want for us to see the portrait as the artist intended, and in doing so we will see a mirror of who we were created to be. In John’s telling, we hear a life story that is our story and not just a sentence that is our ticket to paradise. Jesus is a remaking of creation, and his life models for us what our lives can be like. In his hands, we begin to imagine our own. In his eyes, we discover new ways of seeing. In the telling of his story, we realize ours can be made new. John is particularly interested in helping us make this connection as creation becomes re-

creation. His gospel doesn't read like the other three with their timelines, genealogies, and speeches. He is weaving a tapestry of words and images to invite his audience to completely reimagine what God can do in the world and in their lives. Humanity is not being tossed out and made over again. No, everything is being re-created. Frederick Buechner says the distinction is important:

"To *create* suggests making something out of nothing the way an artist makes paintings or poems. It is true that artists, like carpenters, have to use something else—paint, words—but the beauty or meaning they make is different from the material they make it out of. To create is to make something essentially new.

When God created the Creation, he made something where before there had been nothing, and as the author of the Book of Job puts it, 'the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy' at the sheer and shimmering novelty of the thing...Using the same old materials of earth, air, fire, and water, every twenty-four hours God creates something new out of them. If you think you're seeing the same show all over again seven times a week," writes Buechner, "you're crazy."

I might paraphrase—If you think you're seeing the same show over and over again, you're missing out, you've lost the plot. "Every morning you wake up to something that in all eternity never was before and never will be again. And the you that wakes up was never the same before and will never be the same again either."¹

John's gospel holds tightly to that thread and weaves it in and out of stories of people who see and don't see, of those who are in the dark and in the light, of lostness and foundness. God is inviting you to a life that is neither obligatory nor neglected. God is inviting you to a life that is abundant, to the full, life that is really life. As you can imagine, people flock to this invitation to think differently about their existence. Friends surround Jesus, dinner parties outgrow their spaces. And those who want to wake up to a story that isn't the Empire's story or the culture's story or the family's old stuck and repeating story keep showing up. The powers-that-be crushed their souls every day while Jesus' gently went to work expanding them. Their awareness and their numbers grew every day, but so did the attention of the powerful. The Jesus followers weren't as compliant as they used to be. They were resisting influence and coercion. They were challenging civic authority and social boundaries. They were making a mess of religious and cultural norms, and it was apparent that Jesus' teaching was a threat to the state.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: "Creation"*, p. 20

That's where we left off on Thursday night—this man lovingly repairing and expanding the lives of his followers, challenging and making them in the image of God, inspiring and commanding them to love each other so completely and so well that everyone would know they were his disciples; inviting them all to live as people of the light. And that was enough to end him in a death worthy of enemies of the state because people were taking him seriously, and it was changing their relationship to the power structures. And watching him die was enough to baffle and scatter the ones who loved him most.

But three days later, the ones he loved were looking for him. Racing to find his body. Weeping to make sense of it all. They race and weep and search while it was still dark. John picks up a thread again and adds another stitch—the fretting, the running, and the weeping, the chasing after what isn't there, the presuming the worst and underestimating the work and ways of God. All of that is stuff of the dark and none of it is the stuff of light. The frantic running, pushing tree branches out of the way, chasing and competing to see who will arrive first.

Even they were not sure exactly what they were after—chasing a hunch, chasing a bad dream away, chasing after the one person who could help them make sense of it all if he could just wake up and speak. Mary's eyes puffy and swollen, amazed she still has tears to cry. Grasping at straws to make sense of what she has seen because what she knows in her body and has been told by her eyes and ears are not in synch.

And they end up in a garden. Always remember that John's gospel is holding a narrative thread and weaving it in and out of scenes. The garden is one of those. The garden is where Jesus goes to be near to God in the cool of the day when he prays as his friends repeatedly give into sleep. The garden is where Judas goes to betray his friend with a kiss—one more human fool falling for the myth that violence can redeem and change the story for the better. The garden is where Jesus rises again and calls out to Mary. Voices speak into the chaos: *Why are you running?* Everything is folded and in order. *Why are you weeping?* Go and tell.

Throughout scripture, “[the garden] is an image of the ideal that heightens whatever activity occurs within it. It signals nature at its best, romantic love at its best, human well-being at its best, spiritual reality at its best.”² John is shooting off fireworks for his listeners—know something you cannot be told. Ask good questions: What happens in gardens? What is happening in *this* garden? What is being created here? What is being remade here? What will emerge?

² *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “Garden” p. 317

David Lose speaks to John's use of garden metaphor noting, "he's doing more than just extending the story, he's actually retelling it. Indeed, for this reason, John starts his master work with the same line that begins the whole of the Bible, 'In the beginning...', inviting his readers to imagine that he is telling a new Genesis, a new story of God's creation.

John returns to that theme here, placing – alone among the Evangelists – the story of Jesus' resurrection in a garden. This isn't the first time a garden has been mentioned in John's account...[These] references to gardens are meant to call to mind the original garden, Eden...It's an interesting scene, when you slow down to read it closely. Jesus is there to offer Mary comfort, asking why she weeps and on the verge of sharing news that will turn her grief to joy. Yet she mistakes him for the gardener. Perhaps this isn't as much a matter of mistaken identity as we might think. Or perhaps, as is often the case in John's Gospel, it is an ironic mistake that has significance beyond what we might imagine. For in one sense Jesus is the Gardener, the one in and through whom God creates again, raising him to new life and promising a new relationship with all God's people and, indeed, the redemption of the world."³

What is the new world that Jesus has created? What will grow there in those people he planted? It's one in which women are called by name. Not only do they have direct access to the Divine, but they get the first word. Unexpected, overlooked, ordinary workers are called to be part of his traveling ministry crew and empowered to serve in the very same ways he serves. It's a world in which the weak have a seat of honor at the table, and the powerful can no longer shut them out. The arbitrary boundaries of nation, religion, even sabbath are all knocked down to expand the human awareness of how big and wide and deep the love of God is. It's a world in which the very best wine is saved to surprise the guests as they think the party is winding down only to keep the laughter and the dancing and the time together going. A world in which thousands can be fed if even a child will step forward as the first to share from his abundance. All of these seeds have been planted by the gardener, and his friends will soon realize their roles in tending, pruning, weeding, and harvesting.

Then Lucy Lind Hogan adds this wonderful note: "In the first creation story God drove Eve and Adam out of the garden. But in this new creation Jesus sends Mary out of the garden rejoicing. She is sent out to tell everyone the darkness has not overcome the Word made flesh who had lived among us. She had seen her Rabbi, and she now understood that she has seen 'the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/john-20-11-15/>

truth.' (John 1:14) 'I have seen the Lord.' (John 20:18) Her message declares to us the new beginning that God has prepared for all of us."⁴

Go and tell them what you know, Jesus tells Mary. Tell it with pictures and songs and stories. Tell it with your life. And she does exactly that. It's a commission and blessing for this woman of God to tell the story of her life, tell the story of what she knows in her heart to be real and true, tell the story of what can make the whole world come alive. It's the story that's in you, too, and it's the same invitation for you to be people of this new world God has created and is creating. This is the world at its best and as it should be. No matter how dark and how bleak the story begins, we are people of light. We are prophets of poetry. We are partner gardeners, commissioned storytellers, people of the light. This is who you are. Alleluia, Christ is risen. (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.)

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1236