

Jesus the Gardener
John 20.1-18
Sunday, April 20, 2014
First Sunday of Easter
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott

It was Margaret Atwood who famously said, “In the spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt.” In our little New Orleans rental house, I haven’t done much gardening. But the warmth of Spring has primed my body for a couple of trips to Lowe’s for potting soil, seeds, annuals, and perennials as I begin to fill little patches of dirt and many containers with flowers and herbs. I’m learning the slope of our tiny plot of land as we think of where we might grow tomatoes and some kind of climbing flower that adds a hint of privacy.

I’ve never been the most dedicated of gardeners. I tend to put in most of my hours in Spring and then become more forgetful as the temperature rises. Still, I spent hours in our Richmond yard digging up grass and replacing it with garden beds. Blueberry bushes, wild quince, forsythia, French and oak leaf hydrangeas, dogwood and Japanese maple trees, St. Michelmas daisies, herbs and vegetables, annual petunias and geraniums, various hostas, mounds of lavender, and as many zinnias as one garden could hold.

My favorites each year were the peonies. Peonies can’t grow down here on the Gulf Coast because we don’t have enough of a Winter. I imagine those peonies will be amazing this Spring because they’ve had numerous snows piled on top of them in recent months, and that is pure joy to a peony. They love to sleep beneath a frozen ground. Each year they grow from rhizomes (sort of like a bulb) hidden in the soil. Most years I remembered to cut back the old growth, long withered and dead, so there was nothing to show but a patch of dirt. In fact, the first act of Spring was heading out into the yard on that first, sunny weekend to clear away dead growth everywhere before adding a fresh layer of mulch. But I always remembered where to look for the peonies as the days got warmer, and I’d start to watch those patches of dirt for the small purple stalks that would begin to push through the soil.

Slowly at first, then all of a sudden, those purple stalks would push through the earth and send up shoots, more and more every year, then leaves would explode and round buds would begin to form. When the buds got big enough, bigger than a walnut, smaller than a tangerine, ants would appear. The ants had been watching, too, and the

ants would cover the buds and slowly eat away the layers of natural sugar keeping the flowers glued to themselves. Then swiftly, overnight even, the flowers now would finally release, some larger than two human fists. It is suggested to put tomato cages around the plants when the first shoots begin to grow to later protect the weight of the flowers against their frail stems. The blooms are delicate, intricate, and fleeting. After a week or two of stunning beauty and one hard rain, the flowers are gone until the next year.

It is life giving to spend time with your hands in the soil, weeding and pruning, dividing and moving, digging up another patch of grass and imagining what else can grow there. It's why my friend Richard always sends me pictures of the flats of pansies he's bought early on a Saturday morning with a quick note, "Went to church early today." Tending earth is sacred work.

In her book, *Leaving Church*, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "I know plenty of people who find God most reliably in books, in buildings, and even in other people. I have found God in all of these places too, but the most reliable meeting place for me has always been creation. Since I first became aware of the Divine Presence in [a] lit-up field in Kansas, I have known where to go when my own flame is guttering. To lie with my back flat on the fragrant ground is to receive a transfusion of the same power that makes the green blade rise. To remember that I am dirt and to dirt I shall return is to be given my life back again, if only for one present moment at a time. Where other people see acreage, timber, soil, and river frontage, I see God's body, or at least as much of it as I am able to see. In the only wisdom I have at my disposal, the Creator does not live apart from creation but spans and suffuses it. When I take a breath, God's Holy Spirit enters me. When a cricket speaks to me, I talk back. Like everything else on earth, I am an embodied soul, who leaps to life when I recognize my kin. If this makes me a pagan, then I am a grateful one."¹

It is no accident that scripture welcomes the setting of the garden to communicate intimacy with God and harmony with God's creation.

In Genesis 3, after man and woman have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to them and said, "Where are you?"

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (HarperOne, 2007)

Sometimes the garden shows us the tension between a world as it is and a world as it should be. In these passages, the garden highlights disharmony.

Garden and nature imagery spans the whole of Song of Solomon. “I went down to the nut orchard, to look at the blossoms of the valley, to see whether the vines had budded, whether the pomegranates were in bloom.”

And it is in Song of Solomon that an anxious woman seeks her love, early one morning, in the streets and in the squares. “The sentinels found me, as they went about the city. ‘Have you seen him whom my soul loves?’ Scarcely had I passed them, when I found whom my soul loves, I held him, and would not let him go.”²

In the city, she searches fretfully. But in the garden, “My beloved is mine and I am his.” All is as it should be.

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. The garden of bliss is a moral and spiritual norm against which fallen experience is judged and toward which the human spirit aspires.”³ “Associated as it is with life at its fullest...the garden is one of the framing images of the total Bible story.”⁴

From Genesis to Revelation, the stories we tell of God begin and end with creation and planting as in a garden.

With many of these images firmly in mind, the writer of John’s gospel begins to tell of Mary Magdalene rising early on a Sunday morning to visit the tomb of Jesus. She and Peter and the one whom Jesus loved go searching for their Lord like the woman searching the streets and squares. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

² Song of Solomon 3 and 6

³ P. Morris and D. Sawyer, *A Walk in the Garden: Biblical, Iconographical, and Literary Images of Eden* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992). [via *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: Garden*]

⁴ *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: Garden*, p. 315

Distressed. Searching. Hidden in the early morning dark. The world is not as it should be.

“The ‘garden’ setting for Jesus’ tomb and for the Lord’s appearance to Mary Magdalene is unique to the Fourth Gospel.”⁵ John reminds us of the Lord God walking in the evening breeze, of the intimacy God desires with us, of the nearness of God’s presence even when we do not realize how close we actually are.

Weeping, angry, confused, Mary answers the questions of angels and Jesus but does not realize what is going on until he speaks her name. “Mary!”

When Mary looks to Jesus initially, she does not recognize him. As I have studied this passage all week, I returned to this mistaken identity each day until I decided there is no mistake at all. She did not mistake him for a warrior or a king or a battle-weary victor. No, she mistook him for a gardener.

Perhaps this is why George Bernard Shaw said, “The best place to find God is in a garden. You can dig for him there.” Jesus’ resurrected presence is mistaken for an earth-tender and caregiver; no sword or crown in sight. Mary got it right when she saw the gardener standing there.

One of our favorite children’s authors and illustrators is Kevin Henkes, and of his works, the Lott family loves *My Garden*. A little girl is working in the yard with her mother, and she begins to imagine.

My mother has a garden. I’m her helper. I water. I weed. And I chase away the rabbits so that they don’t eat all the lettuce. It’s hard work, and my mother’s garden is very nice, but if *I had a garden...*

There would be no weeds, and the flowers would keep blooming and blooming and never die. In my garden, the flowers could change color just by my thinking about it—pink, blue, green, purple. Even patterns.

And if you picked a flower, another would grow right back in its place.

⁵ Barbara Rossing, *New Proclamation: Year A, 2005*, pp. 8-9

If I planted seashells, I'd grow seashells. If I planted jellybeans, I'd grow a great big jelly bean bush. Sometimes in my garden, good, unusual things would just pop up—buttons and umbrellas and rusty old keys.

She imagines a world without carrots and a sky filled with “birds and butterflies by the hundreds”. And when the day is done, just in case, right before bed, she takes a seashell from her room and goes to the garden to plant it in the ground. “Who knows what might happen?” she says.

With Jesus as gardener, what begins to grow?

On Thursday night, we recalled the mandate given to Jesus' disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁶

After that scene and just a few chapters before our text today, Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower...Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit...I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.”⁷

Then he repeats the mandate. What will grow on these branches? The very love of God. “You will love one another as I have loved you.” And the fruit of these branches grows in abundance with enough for all and plenty left over.

Jesus' way is not brute force and bully coercion. No, Jesus' way is to cultivate something in us—to plant seeds that grow with careful tending and attention—and we are invited to live into this Way. “The resurrection of Jesus,” writes N. T. Wright, “is the reaffirmation of the goodness of creation.”

The Johannine flair for symbol and metaphor helps us to understand the mysterious reality of resurrection. In John's telling we discover, “The resurrection offers a new horizon for humankind, with a world defined not by death but by life, with the prospect of growth into the fullness of the stature of Christ. All of this is enhanced if we

⁶ John 13:34-35

⁷ John 15:1-5

allow the conventional meanings of the garden—abundant provision, human longing satisfied, harmony achieved, love triumphant—to flow into this one.”⁸

Friends who spoke with me throughout the past few days heard that I have been a woman obsessed with the twist that Mary mistook Jesus for a gardener. For days this is the only word I could hear from John’s resurrection account. Tom Rushing and I sat in my office early last week with two red hymnals in our laps as we selected songs of faith to sing together today. The battle is won, Christ is victorious, and all of the celebration and grandeur one expects from Easter worship. But the one I secretly wanted to sing was “In the Garden.” Elvis and the Gaithers have their versions, and I can hear my grandmother singing it in my ear.

“I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear falling on my ear, The Son of God discloses. And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own; and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.”

Even now, on this morning of new beginnings and new life, I am overcome by the word that Mary didn't think Jesus was a victor--some kind of bruised warrior passing through--but a gardener who was going about his work. And I realize that this gardener Jesus may be the only thing that keeps me holding onto faith; the idea that God plays in the dirt of my life and grows knockout roses and peonies where weeds would otherwise be. When Jesus is raised from the dead and calls out to Mary, he knows he will grow beauty through the good news she will proclaim in the world.

In her study of John’s resurrection story, Barbara Rossing notes, “Christianity owes its existence to Mary’s witness, to her model of faith that responds to Jesus speaking her name and goes out from the garden into the world in public proclamation. Mary does not hold on to Jesus but goes forth in faith to proclaim to the disciples, who had returned to their homes, ‘I have seen the Lord.’”⁹

There is good news for us today, friends. We profess faith in a God who believes in the goodness of soil and the possibility of fresh growth. We welcome a Lord who speaks of growing our lives like branches with the plentiful fruit of love for all. No matter how dry our soil or seemingly barren our land, the resurrected Jesus points to a God who makes all things new—this old world, this old congregation, and our old lives. He calls

⁸ *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: Garden*, p. 317

⁹ Barbara Rossing, *New Proclamation: Year A, 2005*, p. 9

us by name, welcomes us, speaks goodness over us, and sends us out into the world to be the good news.

Bear fruit. Allow God to work in you to make your life flourish. Carry God's kindness and love with you in all places knowing that in this garden when you plant love, more love grows.

As Wendell Berry puts it, "So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Love someone who does not deserve it. Practice resurrection."

If we give ourselves to the Way of this gardener Jesus, who knows what might happen?