

Easter 1B  
Peace, Seattle  
April 5, 2015  
John 20:1-18

## **JESUS THE GARDENER**

**As much as Easter Sunday can be a time of tradition and convention**; a time for rituals like dressing up, eating brunch, hunting eggs, and singing hymns...

As much as Easter may be full of conventions like these, the first Easter was anything BUT conventional.

- Convention is: finding the grave occupied. Convention is: death having the last word.

**But what Mary finds that “first day of the week” flies in the face of convention.**

The tomb is not sealed but opened; his body not present but absent.

**Something is afoot in the garden—new furrows where none have been before; a truth so wholly new it cannot be explained—but only perceived in faith. A moment of recognition that—if we hear it well—will change everything.**

**Maybe that’s why we surround ourselves with the comfort of conventions at Easter—**because we need some ballast to anchor us as we take in the surprising news that the tomb where Jesus’ brutalized body was laid is now empty.

**The Easter proclamation – CHRIST IS RISEN – calls us out from our tightly constructed stories of how the world works, toward A REALITY—NEW and OPEN—where anything is possible.**

**Easter unshackles our imaginations and unties our tongues—or should.**

**So this morning, we are invited to open our minds, our selves, wide enough that we might hear this Easter story in a new way.**

**There are four gospels in the New Testament, and each gospel writer tells the story of Easter a little differently.**

- **Mark** leaves us dumbfounded with the sheer abruptness of his ending.
- **Matthew** shows the might of Rome shaken to the core in the face of Jesus’ vindication.
- **Luke** speaks of the necessity of Christ’s suffering and the experience of his continuing presence in the breaking of the bread.
- And in each of their stories, the women are first to come to the tomb, the first to see it empty.

**But John’s resurrection story takes us in a new direction—in fact, several new directions—at once.**

- Mary Magdalene goes alone to the tomb—and in grief races to tell others what she has found.
- Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” get in race of their own on their way to the graveyard, then, perplexed, return home.
- And when Mary returns to the tomb, still in tears, she mistakes the risen Jesus for someone else.

**There’s a lot going on here.**

**John gives many titles to Jesus in his gospel: he is the Bread of Life, the Light of the world, the Good Shepherd, the True Vine—there are seven in all.**

**But today we learn of another: Jesus the Gardener.**

## What might it mean that Jesus is mistaken by Mary for the Gardener?

Three Renaissance artists, [Dürer](#),<sup>1</sup> [Fontana](#),<sup>2</sup> and [Rembrandt](#),<sup>3</sup> have painted or etched this scene. And all three capture the moment of Mary's recognition.

**In Dürer's etching** Jesus and Mary encounter each other face to face, his wounds clearly visible.

**In Fontana's painting** Jesus faces the viewer as if to say, "this moment belongs to you, too."

But it is **Rembrandt's work** which **most** captivates me.

- Mary, on her knees, has her body turned toward the gaping tomb, while her face, illuminated by rising sun, turns upward and backward toward Jesus.
- Caught in the very moment of surprise, her hands are frozen in mid-air while behind her stands her risen Lord!—a gardener's hat on his head and a shovel in his hand—his body bent not toward Mary but toward the new task at hand—cultivating a New Creation.

Rembrandt captures the essence of what the gospel strives, in this scene, to communicate—that the raising of Jesus from his garden tomb marks the dawning of a new creation.<sup>4</sup>

**Gardens** are places of new and recurring life, where seeds and bulbs come to life, year after year.

**The gardener** oversees this process and does her part so that the cycle of life goes on.<sup>5</sup>

She plants and prunes, digs, fertilizes and waters so that—following God's design—the plants bear fruit in abundance. If you've ever gardened you know the ongoing investment that's required.

In the beginning God planted a Garden in Eden, and just as God walked in that original Garden, so now the Word who became flesh appears in this Garden as the Gardener himself!<sup>6</sup>

This, we can now see, is the **8<sup>th</sup> day of creation**, for **this day**, through him who is the **Resurrection and the Life**, the Garden has been restored.

Did you notice the Tree this morning? (It's hard to miss...)

Throughout the Lenten season we've watched the cross on this wall being transformed into the Tree of Life.

- We watched its trunk grow and send out branches,
- We watched its green leaves fanning out, and its fruits come into fullness.
- And today we can see new, winged creatures among its branches.

One of the great arcing stories of Scripture is how the Tree of Life which stood in the center of God's Garden became the Cross of Christ; and how the Cross of Christ has become, once more, the Tree of Life.

<sup>1</sup><http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=durer+jesus+appears+to+mary&id=7061FE76A2508ABB203A3C8362C43530924DD663&FORM=IQFRBA#view=detail&id=7061FE76A2508ABB203A3C8362C43530924DD663&selectedIndex=0>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=fontana+jesus+appears+to+mary&id=6A85B3FBA04E387DDFA7B174EC383D2E5F0FCAB5&FORM=IQFRBA#view=detail&id=6A85B3FBA04E387DDFA7B174EC383D2E5F0FCAB5&selectedIndex=0>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=rembrandt%20christ%20as%20gardener&qsn=&form=QBIR&pq=rembrandt%20christ%20as%20gardener&sc=0-0&sp=-1&sk=#view=detail&id=D6800810C51ACE31195B84157615B8101905180F&selectedIndex=3>

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to the insights of Jeffrey Wild in his article in The Lutheran: [http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article\\_id=7884](http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article.cfm?article_id=7884)

<sup>5</sup> See the article by Rev. Peter Schineller, S.J. *Jesus the Gardener*, which is partially excerpted here.

[https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.loyolajesuit.org%2Fpeter\\_schineller%2Fresources%2FJESUS%2520THE%2520GARDEN%20ER.doc](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.loyolajesuit.org%2Fpeter_schineller%2Fresources%2FJESUS%2520THE%2520GARDEN%20ER.doc)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Schineller.

**Our first calling, according to Genesis, the first job we ever had as human beings, was to care for the Garden; to tend this Garden home we call Earth.**

**If we believe the evidence, we haven't done our work very well. Our habits are unsustainable.** As Polish poet Che-slaw Mil-osh puts it:

**Whoever believes that “Christ has risen” should not behave as we do.<sup>7</sup>**

Adam and Eve failed to trust God and were ordered to leave the Garden. But the story didn't end there. Today our risen Lord—the Master Gardener—gives us eyes to see that soul and soil, humanity and non-humanity, are redeemed in him; that life's abundance flourishes through him.<sup>8</sup>

**Today, on this 8<sup>th</sup> day of creation, we get to begin again because God began again.**

**On our family's final sabbatical day in Rome last June, we visited the ancient church of San Clemente.** A few short blocks from where gladiators trained for battle we saw the stunning mosaic that filled the entire curved apse of the basilica.

**Was the image we saw portrayed there a cross or was it a tree?**

**From a distance we couldn't tell. But as we drew closer, the answer became clear: it was both.**

**Christ was there on the Cross, but the cross was none other than the Tree of Life, at whose base flowed the four rivers of paradise, restored.<sup>9</sup>**

Sprouting from an acanthus plant<sup>10</sup> at the base of the Tree were scores of spiraling vines whose tendrils spread over the whole length and breadth of the mosaic, nourishing a breathtaking variety of creatures and testifying to the fecundity of all living things which find their origin in the life-generating power of the Cross.<sup>11</sup>

**This is what we celebrate today! The final verdict God pronounces on us and on all creation is not a sentence of death but a sentence of LIFE!**

**Here in God's Garden, the Master Gardener is already at work making it so.**

**He must go on, but first there is Mary.**

And Christ speaks a word that applies to her alone, a word that captures the utter particularity of her individual life. **He calls her name: MARY!**

He has a job for her to perform, news for her to tell: he who was crucified is not dead but living.

**So Mary goes.** And beginning with those closest to Jesus, she spreads the news: I HAVE SEEN THE LORD!

<sup>7</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, in *The Gospel in Our Image*, p. 241

<sup>8</sup> Op cit., J. Wild.

<sup>9</sup> The congregation I serve received a [National Clergy Renewal Grant](#) from the Lilly Foundation, administered by Christian Theological Seminary, in 2013. The final stop on our family's four-month pastoral sabbatical was Rome in 6/2014.

<sup>10</sup> The acanthus is associated with healing and regeneration in Greek. See more @ <http://biblefocus.net/consider/meaning-of-acanthus-greek-versus-hebrew/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> The description of the mosaic by David Foote as published in the November 22, 2012 edition of CRISIS Magazine augments my memory of our visit there during my sabbatical in 2014. His full article can be found here: <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2012/a-sign-of-contradiction-the-apse-mosaic-of-san-clemente>

**Sisters and brothers, that's the trajectory of the Resurrection.** Like the tendrils of the Tree in San Clemente that spiral out in every direction, creating habitat and helping life to flourish, this good news is meant for the whole world to hear, and we are its agents.

There are evil forces at work in our world that claim divine sanction, but who are bent not on life but on death. Their way, of conquering through violence and atrocity, through acts of terror which murder the innocent, is not the way of Jesus, not the way of the Cross or the Tree, not the way of God.

We must resist such evil methods with every fiber of our being.

The resurrection we celebrate today is a call to embrace LIFE, not DEATH.

**And in raising Jesus to new life, God promises to raise us, too, and to open to us once more the vocation of following Christ, the Gardener, as he goes about his work cultivating a new creation, and bearing fruit that will last; fruit that will bring life and healing to this broken and weary world.**

**This is our calling. For Christ is risen. Alleluia!**

**Amen.**