

First Presbyterian Church
John 20:1-18, “Return of the Gardener”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/16/2017 Easter Sunday

Just in time for Easter, Spring is awakening in the Willamette Valley,
and soon our yards will begin to drain out the water
they have soaked up over the last few months
and become rich, generative, cultivated earth.

This is the season when those of us who have a green thumb
begin planting the gardens and flowerbeds which we will
tend and reap the fruits of throughout the summer and fall.

In my household we kind of pretend garden.

We turn over some earth and plant things in there in an orderly fashion,
but only a few pieces of produce actually make their way
to our table or to the Produce Cabana here at church.

Mostly we just get a happy feeling to see something green happening
in the corner of our yard.

But there once was a time when people were co-gardeners with God.

In Genesis we learn that God made the universe, and all that was in it, in five days.

In many ways, Genesis depicts the world as though it were God’s temple,
made out of oceans and mountains and trees
and a huge array of animals, birds, and fish.

Then on the sixth day, in the midst of this great living temple-garden,
God placed...his own image.

If you’re following the temple analogy,
this makes sense: what goes inside of a temple,
is image of the god who is to be worshipped there.

But unlike false gods whose images cannot speak, or see, or hear,
the Living God created living representatives.

Humanity, male and female, made in the divine image.

They are placed in the heart of this temple:
a lush and fruitful garden.

And their mandate was to cultivate the garden -- to tend it, expand it,
sustain the creatures found there, manage it's produce,
and to multiply their own kind
in the midst of this good world God had made.

The interaction they had with their Creator was exceedingly unique.
Genesis chapter 3 says they even recognized the footsteps of God
walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

They recognized the footsteps of the Master Gardener who had given them life,
who had shown them a world of abundance
which was also a world of dependence
upon the One who ordered their world and relationships.

This evocative phrase, **“they heard sound of Yahweh God
walking in the cool of the day...”**
actually sits in the midst of a massive tragedy.

The easy familiarity and dialogue between Adam, Eve,
and their Creator had been based upon a basic relational agreement.

The agreement is described in the Genesis account as,
“Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil.”

Now, let's be clear: it does *not* say this was an apple tree,
nor that it produced apples,
only that the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eye.
Apples have been found guilty by association for far too long!

Adam and Eve gave into the sinister advice of the serpent.

In eating the fruit of the tree, Adam and Eve did not merely break
an arbitrary rule of no practical consequence.

They declared their desire to supplant God's knowledge with their own knowledge,
and to supplant God's authority with their own authority.

With this rebellion, the fundamental relationship
between God and his image bearers was broken.

The Garden was closed up, and the principle of sin
and degradation was let loose in the universe.

The sin we find in abusive relationships,
in calling a lie the truth, and the truth a lie,
in regions full of death and destruction
while others live happily during war,
in the degradation and abuse of our shared garden,
the Earth.

All of this and more was opened up when humanity chose to leave behind
submission to the Master Gardener.

But there was a prophecy made at that time.

Genesis 3 also says that the serpent would be cursed,
and though he may strike the heel of humanity,
humanity would crush the serpent's head.

But this Adversary has proven quite elusive,
and has continued to spread lies to all the descendants
of Adam and Eve from that time until this very hour.

...

Let us jump ahead, then, to one of Adam & Eve's descendants, Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was sent by God to do for creation what Adam, Eve and their descendants
could not do: to be a faithful representative of God's character on the earth,
and to be a blameless and submissive created being
in perfect connection with the God who sent him.

And this Jesus did. It was because of Jesus' deep connection
to the purpose God had given him that he was constantly in conflict
with the broken religious and political powers of the world.

From the Temple in Jerusalem, to his own family, to the Roman empire itself,
Jesus represented a new and baffling authority
that simply would not fit in the existing categories of the world.

The reason is that Jesus' relationship with God was precisely
what Adam and Eve's relationship was like
when they walked with God in the cool of the morning.
Jesus only did what he heard his Father in heaven told him,
he lived in complete submission to the will of God.

We might speculate that, wherever Jesus was,
he re-created the Garden of Eden in his midst,
he opened up the world for people as it was always meant to be.

Sensing this as a strange but direct threat to their own authority
(which it surely was), the Judean and Roman rulers crucified him.

Those who had been connected to Jesus were absolutely bereft of any compass.
They had no idea how it could have been that this Jesus,
whom they had seen turn water into wine, heal the sick,
make the blind to see, calm massive storms with a single word
-- whom they had seen bring others from death to life,
was now ... dead.

I knew something of that kind of confusion following my mother's death,
just over 18 years ago when I was 21 years old.

The most constant and loving presence in my life was taken
by cancer over a 6 month period,
and all that I ordered my life around was shaken.

Some of you know that pain and confusion,
perhaps much more strongly than I have. But this was different.
The loss of a loved one is heavy and devastating,
but the death of Jesus was much more than that.

Jesus made the world make sense for the first time,
and represented a pure connection to the Creator
which the world had not known for millennia.

If Jesus were dead, so, it seemed, was their connection to God
and meaning and purpose and hope and the one person
who had ever loved them to the core of their being.

Mary Magdalene, a female disciple of Jesus,
was in this state of confusion when she went alone
in the dark of the early morning hours to see Jesus' tomb.

Seeing the stone removed and the guards absent,
she assumes his body has been stolen.
Her nightmare grows deeper, and she runs to find Peter and John
(described in John's gospel as "the other disciple"),
and they run to find that not only has
the stone been rolled away,
but the linens from Jesus' burial are found inside the tomb.

v. 7 says, **"the strips of linen (which wrapped his body) were found there,
as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head.
The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen."**

These details revealed to Peter and to John that something different
from body snatching had taken place.

In fact, verse 8 says that John, **"saw and believed."**
What he believed, he was probably unsure of –
John himself comments in v. 9 that they still did not understand
from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.
He and Peter went back to where they were staying.

This is when Mary arrives, weeping, still in despair.

Bending over to look inside the tomb, Mary sees two angels in white,
seated where Jesus' body had been.

Mary -- amazingly unafraid at the sight of angels -- simply says,

**“They have taken my Lord away,
and I don't know where they have put him.”**

She hears something.

Someone was behind her, and in her fear and dismay she turns around,
and she sees a man who asks her the same question the angels had asked,

“Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”

Thinking he was the gardener, she addresses the problem at hand –
the disappearance of Jesus' body, saying,

“I'll go get Jesus' body if you have taken him somewhere.”

Thinking he was the gardener.

Thinking Jesus was the gardener. How right she was!

The man who stood before her was the new Adam,
who lived and died in submission to God,
the one who came tend to the created world,
to return it to God's intended form,
to redeem all of his image bearing sisters and brothers.

Yes, this man was the Gardener whom Genesis had prophesied
would be struck on the heel by the serpent,
but who would in turn crush the serpent's head.

Mary supposed him to be the gardener, but she had no idea how apt a title that was.

While speaking her request,
she turns away from him back toward the tomb of despair.

And so Jesus speaks her name, “Mary.”

Verse 16 says, “She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic,
‘Rabboni!’ (which means ‘Teacher’).”

Jesus tells her not to hold onto him, for he is returning to the Father.
So she goes to the disciples with the news –
the first preacher of the resurrection –
exclaiming, “I have seen the Lord!”

For John, belief came from seeing the wrappings in the tomb,
but for Mary it arrived when she heard her name spoken
by the One who loved her.

Jesus speaks her name, and the disturbed tomb is now an empty tomb,
the men in white are now angels,
the stolen body of Jesus is now alive,
the gardener is now Jesus her Rabbi and Lord.

Some people have a story of encountering the truth of God in a stark way,
being brought out of darkness into light.
But most of us grow in our hearing of the good news over time –
we hear our name only faintly at first,
and we begin walking with some others,
through the difficulties of life.

Along the way, there may be several times when God reminds us
of the resurrection life of Christ
and what that means for our world of despair.

Each time we are brought to a deeper level of belief –
even as John’s initial belief was as thin as the linens he saw in the tomb,
but would later grow and mature.

When we hear Jesus say our name,
the broken world we live in is brought back into a coherent whole,
and we see that a new way of living has opened up.

All of us, whether we know it or not,
long to be with God in the world where everything makes sense.
The life of faith in Jesus Christ makes that possible.

Praise be to the God of all creation that the Gardener has Returned.

Let us declare with our sister Mary this most life-giving truth:

Christ is Risen!

He is Risen indeed!