

Supposing Him to be the Gardener

First UMC of Pocatello

Easter Sunday

April 17, 2022

John 20:1-18

After Jesus had died and needed to be buried, John tells us that “there was a garden in the place where [Jesus] was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb...And so, because...the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there” (John 19:41-42). And when Mary Magdalene went to grieve at that tomb two days later, she initially mistook the risen Christ for the gardener.

Which means... there was a gardener. *A gardener.*

In that cemetery adjacent to the part of town where people were regularly being crucified, a man had been appointed to tend a garden.

What a *bummer* of a job.

What a horrible placement! His colleagues in the gardening guild, they were tending their beds in the courtyards of temples and palaces, in the terraced neighborhoods of the nobility, around the public parks and pools. *He* was pressing his spade into the ground of an execution chamber. No one ever came to his cemetery to honor a life that had passed naturally, only to weep for those who'd been brutally put to shame.

What a bummer of a job.

The entire time Jesus was ministering in Israel and gaining in both popularity and infamy, this guy was ascending the hill of crucifixion to go to work.

While Jesus was turning water into wine, the gardener was stooped over a seedling.

While Jesus was running the money changers out of the Temple, the gardener was pulling another pest off of a green leaf.

While Jesus was performing his miracles - feeding the crowds, healing the sick, walking upon water - the gardener was pushing his wheelbarrow.

While the crowds from Jerusalem were going out to see the man who raised Lazarus from the dead, while their *Hosannas* hung in the air, the gardener was pruning his vines.

Always he went about his work in proximity to those crosses; always he was gardening with death in view.

Now, I don't think the gardener was any kind of radical - at least not at first. Surely he was a government man at the lowest point on the totem pole, or a wage worker compelled by necessity to take a placement no one else wanted. He'd be reliable and collect his pay.

Nor do I think the garden was his idea. I think the Romans wanted it planted as a way of trying to hide the horrors of that place, to make what went on there seem a bit more palatable. A well-kempt garden would give clear testimony to their rightly ordered world, to the necessity of their crosses.

Yet I do sense that he, like any patient and faithful gardener, must've grown to care about his work. As a man who worried over drought and rejoiced over first blossoms, he could never have loved the sights and sounds of death. As a man of living trees, he could never have loved those crosses. A garden means color and fragrance and shade, microbes and insects and birds. Perhaps he began to see in his dedication a humble offering, a last offering of lovely earth to dimming eyes, of freshened air to laboring lungs.

But no matter his personal feelings toward it, he had grown a garden in the Place of the Skull. He had labored for beauty among the dying and dead. It was *his* garden that got its miracle. The place to which

he gave his attention everyday received its resurrection. Jesus made his first resurrection appearance in Golgotha's Garden.

On that first Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene thought Jesus to be the gardener, she was wrong, sure, but she might as well have been right. *For this, too, is what Jesus does.* He goes into the worst possible places and begins the slow work bringing forth life and beauty, of adding invisible minerals and microbes and seeds to the ground of our lives. He plants. He waters. He tends. He prunes. He grows. His love and hope and kindness establish their roots, and their fruits grow sweeter with every passing year.

At some level, don't we all hope this about our lives?

Don't we hope that, in being faithful to the work set before us, by tending what we have been given, more would one day be set before us? Oh, that we'd see a resurrection!

Isn't it Jesus who said, "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10)? There is *power* in being faithful to very little, to gardening in your own little corner of the world, if its where God has called you to be.

If God has ever set a person, a people, a place, a vocation before you, and it feels like taking a position as the gardener in Golgotha; if you've ever asked God, "Why is *this* the thing I've been called to do? Why is *this* the place I've been called to be?" There is good news for you: resurrection comes.

Garden of Golgotha! Are you not the first plot in the Kingdom of Christ? You, a garden on the outskirts of a city, in a place where green things do not belong, do you not show us the way to abundant life?

As for the gardener himself, we won't ever know his name, but I believe he was made happy on that Easter day, that he was satisfied. I'm sure after the commotion of the morning, he got right back to his work. He had trees that needed watering and beds that needed weeding. He couldn't very well stop caring for this ground now, now that he knew its work was not - had never been - in vain.

Sure, today there might be more crosses raised, but his garden would be making its witness. And its finest fruit, its brightest bloom was now out there somewhere, changing the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.