

Supposing him to be the gardener
An Easter Sunrise homily by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – March 31, 2024

Please Read:
Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

It's appropriate that we meet here in the Memorial Garden each Easter morning, even if it is a bit cold. For the garden is where the story begins in Genesis, and where the story goes on forever in the book of Revelation. And in the fullness of time, somewhere in the middle, we read about a garden scene on that first Easter morning two thousand years ago.

The first person to see and behold the resurrected Jesus was Mary, Mary Magdalene. Can you imagine? The crucified risen Lord Jesus standing right before you! It would have been a joyful moment of recognition and hope, to be sure...

Actually, that's not how it happened at all! The gospel writer John is clear that Mary, the first witness to the resurrection, did not actually recognize Jesus. Mary looked up on that first Easter morning and saw Jesus, but she mistakenly thought he was the gardener. She talked with him, but "supposing him to be the gardener."

How in the world did that happen? How could she have not recognized Jesus? She had been with him for several years, very close to him. (Some have speculated too close to him!) She might have been the one to have washed his feet with her hair. Mary was as close to Jesus as anyone. How in the world did she make that mistake?

Rembrandt, one of my favorite painters, painted this very scene. There is Mary, weeping in the early dawn. And there is Jesus with this funny straw sun hat and digging shovel. The hat and shovel actually weren't details John included, but Rembrandt playfully assists Mary in her confusion.

Yes, Mary confused Jesus with the gardener on that first Easter, and how could she have made that mistake? Perhaps it's John's imaginative way of picking up the image of God as Gardner, the one who calls forth new life, and nurtures and tends all of creation to fruitfulness?

Have you ever considered Jesus as gardener during his ministry! Jesus tore into religious legalists, especially the Pharisees, just like a gardener might tear into some overgrown thicket, cutting away the old growth. Mary had seen Jesus cut into new growth, too, training and trimming the branches that were his disciples. Like a careful gardener, Jesus tended to the sick and lame, giving health and strength.

Last Spring, after the daffodils had all blossomed and started to wilt, Kim went out to tie them up and then pulled up all the bulbs, cleaned them, and put them neatly in boxes in the basement of the Manse. We're talking hundreds of bulbs, probably close to a thousand! Quite honestly, after a few months of drying in the basement, those bulbs looked pretty dead. Then in the Fall, she went around the garden and planted those bulbs in the soil. They were there all winter and a number of times covered in snow and ice. I think we both secretly wondered whether they would actually come back to life. But sure enough, our back garden is blooming with daffodils and it's a beautiful thing to behold.

In the garden of life, there is no one more delighted than Jesus when life springs forth. Jesus delights in us. Jesus the Gardener wants to see us grow. Jesus wants to till and turn the soil of our lives. Sometimes that tilling is painful. He doesn't deal with us superficially but gets to the roots. He takes out the rocks. He turns over the earth and exposes it to the sun. Tilling the soil of our souls is not always comfortable.

But if you are having some earth turned over in your life, and if you thought it was just a hindrance, a burden, an obstacle, maybe you are mistaken. Maybe you are mistaken like Mary was mistaken. Maybe the plowing in your life is being done by Jesus. Maybe it's the gardener Jesus preparing the soil for new life.

Jesus plants new seeds in our lives. And sometimes we don't recognize those seeds. The new growth can be unknown and strange to us, even frightening. Again, don't be mistaken. Those new seeds might come from Jesus.

And Jesus weeds, too. He casts out weeds and pests just like he casts out demons and illnesses. That's why Mary thought he was the gardener; he had cast seven demons, seven pests, from her own life! Jesus is also the one who cuts back dead limbs; he prunes. Hey, sometimes what is being pruned looked perfectly good to us. What is that, some kind of mistake? No, it isn't a mistake. It is Jesus. It is Jesus, pruning, grooming you for new life.

Yes, for new life. That new life confuses us just like it confused Mary on that first Easter morning. She mistakenly identified Jesus as the gardener, just like we mistakenly identify the sources of weeding and pruning and tilling and turning in our own lives. We think those travails come from somebody else, or something else.

Mary, the first witness of resurrection, did not recognize Jesus at first. She remained confused until something else happened, when a holy moment occurred. That

moment was when Jesus spoke her name to her. He called her by name. He said one word, “Mary.”

Jesus calls each of us by name, and he delights when we emerge from the darkness of that which binds us! Jesus says, “Doug!” and “Steph” and “Mary” and “Terry” and “Lisa” and “Terence”... He calls every single one of us by name.

Jesus knows us like a gardener knows us, like a holy gardener who tends to resurrection in the Spring, like a gardener who knows that seeds don't die when they slip into the ground and into the darkness of the grave.

Whoever you are, and whatever you have been going through lately, Jesus speaks your name this morning. We may look like the same old people this morning. We may look like we did last year or last season. But we are transformed. We have been turned and tilled. We have been weeded and pruned. We have been transformed in these past few days, when we were blinded by crucifixion pain at noon, when we slept in the darkness, and when we wept in the early dawn.

God shares Easter with us today. God wants to delight in us, we who pop our heads up out of sleep and darkness and winter this early Spring morning. Today is the day of resurrection! Today is the day of new life. Let us be rejoice and be glad!

Thank God, the Master Gardener! Amen.