

Sermon – “Garden Serendipity”  
Scripture Reading—John 20:1-18  
Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Let us open the scriptures to the reading of the events that took place on that first Easter morning as they are recorded by “the other disciple” in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

At the heart of the Gospel reading for Easter is the resurrection appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. We continue our reading in John. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she told them that the Risen Christ had said these things to her. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Garden Serendipity”

*The text: ...she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus... Supposing him to be the gardener ... John 20:14a, 15b*

Let us pray. God of the Garden, give us hearts open to serendipitous encounters and give us eyes to recognize you. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The Bible begins and ends with garden imagery. The creation story in Genesis One presents the cosmic garden with all the light and darkness across the universe coming into being through the spoken word of God. In Genesis Two, we are introduced to the Garden of Eden where life begins for Adam and Eve. They are created within relationship with one another and with their Creator who asks them to become gardeners “to till and to keep the garden” and who freely gives them all the fruit from the Tree of Life and all the trees within the garden except for one. As the story unfolds, we learn that this is the one tree from which they eat, and the consequence for not honoring limitations or listening to God is to be asked to leave the garden.

The last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22 includes garden imagery in the middle of the city of God where the Tree of Life produces eternal fruit and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. The river that nourishes the Tree of Life flows from the throne of God. And so, the story of our Judea Christian faith begins and ends in the garden.

Garden imagery is woven throughout Christ’s teachings. He reveals the mystery of God’s steadfast presence and cultivation in our lives through stories about the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, vines and branches, weeds and wheat, sowers and seeds. Jesus spends his last evening praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before he is betrayed and crucified as an innocent man on the cross, the Tree of Life.

Today we find ourselves in the garden with Mary as she serendipitously meets her Risen Savior whom she supposes is the gardener. Perhaps this mistaken identity is no mistake at all. Perhaps Jesus, as the Gardener, embodies what it means to be both fully human and fully divine. The One who created the garden and who asks us to be gardeners, is discovered in the garden, not by mistake but through God’s providence and grace.

Arguably the oldest occupation, a gardener produces life by planting, tending, pruning, and cultivating. The gardener respects the earth, depends on the Creator, and honors the seasons and cycles of life. Following a long, barren and cold winter, gardeners are always delighted by the surprises of rebirth in their gardens, the appearance of perennial fruits and flowers, and the unexpected birth of new life sown by the birds, the bees, and the butterflies following the dormant season of the earth. For those of us who have the privilege of living in the Prairie Heartland, we are greeted this Easter morning by the symbolic white crosses of the Dogwoods and by the lavender royalty of the Redbuds.

It is in the garden, in the place of unexpected rebirth that Mary meets the Risen Christ. It is serendipity, totally unexpected, a fortuitous happenstance, a lovely surprise, a happy coincidence, a fluke, an unplanned, life-changing discovery.

The word serendipity was first coined in the English language by Horace Walpole in 1754. In a letter to a friend he explains his unexpected discovery of a lost painting and references *The Three Princes of Serendip*, the title of a Persian fairy tale in which the heroes ‘were always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.’

Mary was in quest of Jesus’s body; however, she was not looking for the Risen Christ. Mary discovers the Gardener is the Risen Christ when he calls her by name. When she hears her name spoken by the One who has cultivated her faith, tilled her values, and planted hope in her heart, Mary knows that her Redeemer liveth and embraces the astonishing reality of the resurrection.

The irony of this fortuitous happenstance is that the One for whom Mary grieves is standing unbeknownst by her side and she does not recognize him. One cannot help but wonder how many times the Risen Christ is standing unbeknownst by our sides and we do not recognize him. Each week your pastors gather in this historic chancel to pray for members and friends. Our prayer is that we will each unearth the Risen Christ by accident and sagacity and that we will each delight in the serendipity of hearing the Gardener call our name --- an unplanned, life-changing discovery.

Today we commemorate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Gardener, and we proclaim with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God could not be contained in the tomb.

Today we rejoice that the story of our faith begins and ends in the garden, that those who were asked to leave the garden are welcomed home to the garden, and that the river which nourishes the Tree of Life flows from the throne and grace of God.

Today we join Mary in the garden outside the empty tomb, celebrating the serendipity of life and faith... and proclaiming the day of resurrection.

Halleluiah, Amen!