

John 20:1-18

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. 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.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). 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." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (429)

What are you looking for? You've come here today. You've gone to the trouble—gotten yourself up, pulled yourself together, which you either do every Sunday, or from time to time, or on holidays like this one, or never before now. What have you come looking for?

It's a question Jesus asked a few times according to the Gospel of John, which gospel we heard from just now. We have four to choose from, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four give us an account of the resurrection of Jesus, and each a little different, each written for different communities of the early church and by different people in different places, recalling the stories that had been passed around orally, committing them to writing lest they be lost to history.

This move to write them down all came from around the same moment in history, when the world had begun to crack and cleave. After a long period of good enough peace, and then a couple centuries of uprisings and crackdowns, in the late half of the first century, Rome had had enough of Jewish revolt. This time they'd make it so no revolt would ever be possible again.

Plus, this new sect of Jews, these Jewish-Christians: in the late first century, they were confusing matters still more. There had always been this tacit agreement, Jews could be Jews as long as they laid low and didn't make waves. But now, with this. Synagogues in turmoil about what this new way meant. Villages at odds within themselves.

Rome would come at last and would do its worst.

And this would force an urgency among those who didn't want their story lost along with their lives. They would write it all down: "Mark" around the year 70, "Matthew" and "Luke" around the year 80, and this one, John, around the year 90 and for a community of exiles in the north, driven from homes and villages, driven into the hills.

For this, the Gospel of John is the most literary of the four, the one with the greatest internal coherence. We've spent a lot of time in John's world this Lent, these last several weeks that lead up to Easter. John's world has it that the creation is yet on-going, is not yet complete, not yet perfected. In much of the rest of the biblical imagining, there's an assumption that the creation is complete, that those storied seven days had happened in their way: God had created until all was finished and then came that day of rest, well earned, well deserved. God could at last rest.

But the Gospel of John has us in the middle of that mighty week, all time, all history, but in the middle. John, this book, begins as Genesis began, "In the beginning..." It then likewise counts down days, its first few events recounted on "that day," and then "the next day," and then "the next day," until we're finally on the third day, which doesn't make sense chronologically, for by this point we should be on the fourth day, but does make sense theologically, for on this "third day" we find ourselves at the wedding in Cana where Jesus performed his first sign, and it was one of abundance, one of ever-flowing sustenance and even celebration: wine made from water so never to run out. It was a vision of the promised feast to come in eternity, when creation and indeed time has come complete and all is one, all is peace, when none shall hunger or thirst, none shall weep or mourn, when the lion

shall lie down with the lamb and justice shall roll down like the waters and righteousness shall pour forth like an ever-flowing stream. The third day this happened on, the day of resurrection: it was a vision and indeed an experience of resurrection.

And so the rest of the gospel unfolds amidst this strange time, when there's a sense of completion while also on-going work of creation yet to do. Jesus understands himself according to John as having come to do the works of God, to do the works that God had begun and yet needed to have done, and he gathers disciples to join him in that work, to do these works and indeed "even greater works than these," all to an end that would be completed on the cross, God poured out, grace upon grace, that the creation might abide in that grace.

So, wait, what are you looking for? Maybe it's this?

Mary didn't recognize Jesus at first—and why should she? She'd come to the tomb expecting death, but here was someone who was alive. So she saw in him another expectation, a gardener. I mean, the tomb was in a garden, so she was in a garden, which must make this man who was wandering around the gardener, which was wrong of course, and also not quite wrong.

I'm not a gardener, and I haven't even spent much time cultivating an appreciation for gardens, which I know many of you have. But this I know: gardens are planned and cultivated, and excellent gardens are ones that have excellent plans, like a progression of color or flowering throughout the growing season, or shapes that move you through the garden in some certain way, hedgerows in the right place to steer your course or flowering beds as the endpoint with a bench nearby for restful watching or even a fruit tree for light sustaining, a cherry tree, an apple tree. Gardens are the meeting place of the wild and the cultivated. They take the rough stuff of the wilderness and tame it to a degree, a higher mind having planted this whole lovely thing and tended to it so it's beautiful to the human eye and sustaining for the human spirit and the human body. Apples. Peas. Around here zucchinis and more zucchinis.

Mary wasn't wrong to assume this was the gardener for in a certain sense Jesus was the gardener, and indeed is. Taming our spirit so to follow in his way, cultivating grace where we might more easily tend to acrimony, even violence.

Really, consider: in Jesus taking on the violence of the cross and returning that furious energy to us as peace, peace, Jesus is a gardener of our souls that we might live and thrive together in cultivated grace and peace, lovingkindness and goodwill. It's not the natural way of things. Dog eat dog. Survival of the fittest. Yes, cooperation has a place amidst nature. Ants cooperate. Mushrooms, rightly known, can only but amaze. But just as common, if not indeed more so: profligate death. Evolution is itself a factory of death. That's the way to resilient life. Tragic.

So, Jesus, a gardner: she didn't recognize him as anything but that until he said her name: "Mary." Which calls her to herself, and which then calls her to fuller seeing, something so beyond any rightful expectation. Here, a graveyard that is rather a garden, something recalling of Eden: as in the beginning so apparently in the end, Eden where all is peace. Here, a tomb that is rather a womb, some astonishing, terrifying, oh please yes true birth. Here, life. Abounding life. Life that has moved through death and rises as life never to succumb or submit to death again, life that neither exploits nor exhausts, neither dominates nor depends on death, but is rather and only life, the livingness of all things.

Maybe it's this which you've come looking for...?

Because otherwise we are verily saturated in death.

Things are rough, yo. Much that I love seems to be coming undone. I had to help close a church this year, the congregation in Monterey where I loved and served for twenty-five years. The country I have loved, if often critically and even woefully, seems to be clawing and scratching itself to death (possible death)-and it has seemed gleefully lately to bring about death, whether by withdrawing global aid or domestic care, or by assaulting cities and their people, or very recently by making war and describing it in terms of "fun," an excursion, all while pressing matters of justice get forgotten. (Fingers crossed!)

Meanwhile, I've lost loved ones to death, which perhaps you have as well or held close others who've lost loved ones to death. Young people wonder what future they even have. Old people know they're one fall away from bankruptcy. People wonder how they'll get to work because the gas they need to get there is beyond what they can pay. Truly, Easter, as ever, comes to a world with very little reason to believe in the promise of irrepressible life and beloved being, indeed with every reason to believe in the ultimate

victory of unending struggle and sorrow and death, the undoing of all things noble and beautiful, true and good.

Maybe it's this that you're tired of—this very reasonable thinking. Maybe it's this that you're seeking to see past, this dark horizon beyond which the knowing world insists, “Don't even bother trying.”

Let us keep trying. Let us go to this gracious bother. Let us meet on this hilltop to see past where we otherwise cannot easily see. There is light on the horizon that no darkness will shut up. There is hope to sing forth that none shall stop. A table is set before us, and it is both to recall a last supper and to foretell a final feast that is laid out for all people, a table made ready with a seat for all creation. Here it is finished and we may rest.

And then, rested, restored, we shall leave this place called as ever to do the works of creation that all things good shall be planted and shall rise, to grow, to thrive.

Thanks be to God.