

“A TALE OF TWO GARDENS”
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Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

Back in the late 90’s, I visited the Holy Land. It was the experience of a lifetime. To see all of the places I’d read about in the Bible for so long, to walk where Jesus walked, to see Bethlehem and Bethsaida, Jerusalem and Jericho was incredible. We sailed on the Sea of Galilee and saw the hillside where Jesus fed the five thousand. Perhaps most moving of all, we walked the Via Dolorosa – the Way of the Cross – and remembered everything that happened to Jesus in the last week of his life.

Then we visited the tomb. Actually, let me correct that – we visited two tombs. One of the tombs where it is reported that Jesus’ body was laid after he died is below The Church of the Holy Sepulchre – a very ornate, gilded, candle lit church mostly run by the Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

But there is another site as well purported to be the final resting place of Jesus – and that is called The Garden Tomb. It is mostly run by Protestants. It is literally in a garden – a really beautiful, lush garden – and the tomb is hewn into the side of a huge wall of rock.

Like I said, we visited both of those places, because of course, no one really knows exactly where the tomb was – but I want to tell you, that every single one of us in our tour group – to a person - hoped that it was in The Garden Tomb. Why? Because it was quiet and plain and pastoral and peaceful. And it was in a garden.

Gardens are important to us Christians, you know. Because our story began in a garden – a perfect garden – the Garden of Eden. And, for all intents and purposes, on that first Good Friday, it looked like our story would end in a garden as well – as Jesus, crucified cruelly on a cross, was laid in a garden tomb.

This morning’s Gospel lesson begins in the aftermath of that horrible event. On the Sunday after that Friday, the scripture says that Mary Magdalene, “while it was still dark,” went to the tomb. And believe you me, that means far more than just the absence of sunlight – light had gone out of life itself because Jesus was gone. The light of the world had been extinguished, there was no hope, no joy, no anything. Those who loved him were absolutely, positively numb with grief – especially Mary Magdalene.

You may remember that Mary Magdalene's life had been totally turned around after she met Jesus – totally turned around. He healed her of the demons with which she struggled, he helped her feel worthy again, he counted on her support, he cherished their friendship. He brought light back into her life – she was a totally new person – anything was possible.

And then, he was murdered on a cross, right in front of her eyes, and she was devastated. And, I'm sure, panicking. What would she do now? Would her life go back to being the way it was before she met Jesus? How could she go on?

While it was still dark, in the sky and in her soul, Mary Magdalene got up on that first Easter morning and went to the tomb. If you've ever lost someone you love, you get that, don't you? You get how going to their grave is somehow comforting.

But comfort was the last thing Mary got – what she got was the shock of her life. As if losing Jesus wasn't bad enough, now she comes upon the tomb and discovers that the great huge stone that had covered it had been rolled away, and of course, she thinks the worst. His body has been stolen, and the grief that she thought was all-consuming, unbelievably got worse.

In a panic, she runs back and tells two of the disciples, and all three of them rush back to the tomb. Peter and the other disciple get there first, take a look around, and then go back home. Mary doesn't. She can't. She is devastated.

Then she looks into the tomb and sees two angels, and they ask her why she's weeping. She explains to them that someone had taken away the body of her Lord and she didn't know where they had put him.

And then she turned around and saw a man standing there. She assumed he was the gardener, and he too asked her why she was crying. Again, pleading, she tells him that Jesus' body has been taken away, and asks, "Do you know where he is? Tell me, and I'll go get him."

What happened in the next moment changed life for Mary and for the rest of the world forever and ever. What happened in the next moment is that he said her name, "Mary," and immediately she knew it was Jesus! We cannot possibly imagine the joy she felt. He was alive! Alive! Standing right there in front of her! He had burst forth from that tomb, and defeated death!

And when he did, he brought creation full circle. For in that first garden, Adam and Eve started a cycle of sin that kept going and going and going, until in the second garden, Jesus paid the price for it – for all of our sins - once and for all.

But for Mary, all that she knew was that her Savior was alive, and her heart fairly burst with joy. She ran from that place and shouted to anyone who would listen, "I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord! He's alive! He's alive!"

Later, Jesus would appear to his disciples, and they too went forth to shout the news far and wide that he was alive, he had risen from the dead, and life for everyone was changed forever because of it.

It's the message they shout to us today as well! Because he lives, we live too, now in this life and in the life to come. That's the Good News of Easter – death has been defeated, life has been changed, and all things are possible!

What does that mean for us? How do we respond to that? Well, this morning I want to suggest we do that in three ways – believe it, say it and show it.

Believe it! As one person put it, “The power that raised Jesus from the dead can raise you from despair, and that same power is calling you by name and is still at work doing a new thing in you and in the church and in the world! Easter is the promise that nothing in your past, present or future has the ultimate power to define you.” (On-line, The Rev. Pam Driesell, “Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans,” 4/24/11)

Believe that all things are possible for you and for the world because Jesus defeated death! Believe that nothing in your past need hold you, that nothing in your present cannot be changed, and the future is filled with possibilities. Believe that whatever struggles come your way will not win – God will – always!

Pastor Jon Walton says it like this: “We can take heart in the hope and joy that Easter represents. Death is finally not the most powerful presence on earth, God's love is, and nothing can separate us from that love, not even death itself. We can live this day with joy and thanksgiving, because each day is now a new beginning, a day with a new reality and a new destination. We are headed toward God, and we are leaning on the everlasting arms. The same God that watches over us by night and by day, is with us in all times and all places whether it be a cross or an empty tomb, because the Lord is risen!” (On-line, Jon Walton, “Practice Resurrection”)

So believe the Good News of Easter, believe it. And then say it! Mary Magdalene and the disciples told everyone they knew that they had seen the Lord. Now I'm not suggesting that you need to run around saying “I have seen the Lord” although that's surely okay. What I'm saying is you can say that in so many different ways and get the same message across.

You say “I have seen the Lord” when you speak words of goodness and kindness in this world of unbelievably vitriolic and vile language that's being spoken these days. You say “I have seen the Lord” when you choose to lift up good things instead of always griping about what's wrong and bad in the world. You say “I have seen the Lord” when you praise instead of put down. You say “I have seen the Lord” when you're positive instead of complaining.

Believe it. Say it and then show it! Show the power and reality of Easter with your very life. Wonderful United Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton says that “Our work is to follow Jesus in restoring the garden. That means that every day we are on a mission. Every morning we wake and say, ‘Here I am, Lord, send me!’ Every conversation we have, every decision we make, every action we take, is an opportunity for God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.” (Adam Hamilton, *John: The Gospel of Light and Life*, p. 158)

Show the power of Easter, the power of resurrection with your life. How do you do that? Well, let me give some ideas by the way of a few stories.

On Monday, April 18th, this year’s Boston Marathon will be run by thousands and thousands of people. Among the runners will be people who lost limbs in the vicious terrorist attack on the marathon three years ago. They are showing resurrection faith, by their very lives and their participation in this race and in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels - they are showing that love triumphs over hate, good triumphs over evil, life triumphs over death, all things are possible. They’re showing resurrection faith!

Just this week, someone we all know pretty well showed resurrection faith! His name is John Harbaugh and, as most of you know, he coaches the Baltimore Ravens. Most of you also know that the Ravens lost one of their own this week – a gifted young man killed in the prime of his life. Harbaugh and the rest of the team have been devastated by Tray Walker’s death. Do you know that John Harbaugh sat down one night after receiving word of Walker’s serious injuries and wrote a letter to his team – a personal letter of love and care? That was impressive enough, but what touched me even more was hearing about the conversation he had with members of the press.

He was talking about Tray Walker and the special man he was, and then as one account put it, “he whipped out his cell phone, put on his glasses and read a Bible verse, Isaiah 25:8, that popped up Tuesday as the latest installment of the daily scriptures that he receives. Like that (the account continued) he took the more than two dozen media members at his packed table to church. ‘The Lord will swallow up death forever,’ Harbaugh read, “and wipe away the tears from all faces.” (On-line, ktvb.com, 3/25/16)

John Harbaugh – showing resurrection faith to a listening, hungry world.

Finally, a woman whose story you have probably heard before. She was a woman who was dying and she knew it, so she went to her pastor to get her ducks in a row about her funeral. She had everything planned out. She had picked out the clothes she would be wearing, the scriptures that would be read, the hymns that would be sung – everything – and she told him all her plans. And then she told him one final thing. “When they bury me preacher, I want my Bible in one hand and a fork in the other!” “A fork,” he said, “why do you want to be buried with a fork?”

“Well,” she responded, “I’ve been thinking about all of the church dinners and banquets that I attended through the years. I couldn’t begin to count them all. But one thing sticks in my mind. At those really nice get-togethers, when the meal was almost finished, a server or maybe the hostess would lean over my shoulder and whisper, ‘You can keep your fork.’ And do you know what that meant? Dessert was coming! And it didn’t mean a cup of Jello or pudding or a dish of ice cream. You don’t need a fork for that. It meant the good stuff, like chocolate cake or cherry pie! When they told me I could keep the fork, I knew the best was yet to come! That’s exactly what I want people to talk about at my funeral. Oh, they can talk about all the good times we had together. That would be nice. But when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to turn to one another and ask, ‘Why the fork?’ Then I want you to tell them that I kept my fork because the best was yet to come.” Resurrection faith! The best is yet to come! (Roger William Thomas, “Keep Your Fork,” *A 3rd Serving of Chicken Soul for the Soul*, p. 186)

Friends, on that day long ago, in a garden, the great Good News of Jesus’ resurrection changed life for all the days to come. Believe it! Believe in life, believe in life beyond death, believe in goodness defeating evil, believe that love wins!

Then say it. Say it however and whenever you can, and say it especially to those who are struggling and need to know that God always makes a way.

Then, finally, show it. Show resurrection faith with your life.

My friends, Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Believe it, say it, and show it this day and all the days ahead! May it be so! Amen.