

Mary Magdalene comes to the garden alone. She comes to the tomb while it was still dark; but the dawning of light is very near. A moment of extraordinary encounter about to occur. We witness Mary's transformation from desolation to hopeful expectancy. She notices that the stone has been rolled away, but she is still in the dark about its true meaning. We wonder what she's thinking; what she expects to find. Mary is lost, staying rooted to the last place Jesus had been - in the garden, in the tomb. Mary returns to the grave, still faithful, still waiting, still weeping; immersed in her grief.

Why does she look in the tomb? What does she expect to see? It seems certain that she does *not* expect an empty tomb. When someone dies, you say good-bye. You pay your respects. You go on with your life as best you can. We can almost feel the hurt and longing in when we listen to this passage. As we look deeper into our story, when Mary sees the tomb wide open, she runs back to tell Simon Peter and "the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, that the stone has been rolled away and the body had been stolen." What ensues is an action sequence: At Mary's summons, Peter and the other disciple race to the tomb to see Mary's news for themselves. The beloved disciple has the distinction of reaching the tomb first and looks in. However, it is Peter who is the first to enter and see that the headcloth is neatly folded lying apart from the wrappings. Odd, that someone should go to all the trouble of folding it. The beloved disciple followed Peter inside, saw and believed. Believed what? John does not say. He simply believed, and without a word to each other they return to their homes. The rest of the story belongs to Mary. Lingering in the garden, weeping Mary finally looks into the tomb, something she had not done before. She sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. They question her, "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.*"

It is then that the risen Jesus appears, but Mary doesn't recognize him, "supposing him to be the gardener". Why would Mary think he is the gardener? Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was crucified at Golgotha. If we turn to John 19:41 we read: *Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea laid Jesus there, the Jewish day of Preparation.*

I wonder if there was a deeper connection to Mary mistaking Jesus as the gardener? In this scene, if I listen closely, I can hear echoes of creation from Genesis: Back on the first day of creation, when it was still dark, God started to do something. God started blowing wind, God's breath, God's spirit hovered over the dark abyss. In that moment, Creation began. The darkness lost to light and was pushed back: like sunrise after a storm. And God kept creating all week, until Eden existed where darkness existed before. A garden of peace and plenty, a garden of delight and harmony, a place where Adam and Eve lived in wholeness and right relationship with God, walking easily with all creation. God was the gardener, the planter, the creator. This is a familiar story, isn't it?

Could John be playing on a creation theme? Is it possible that Mary misunderstanding Jesus as the Gardener be ironically, a deeper understanding? The Gardener at the beginning of time coming back to the Garden, bringing life from an empty tomb?

Jesus never says, "I am not a gardener." He simply calls her by name. In that moment, Mary recognizes Jesus only after Jesus speaks her name. In Mary's grieving and weeping and through her tears, she recognizes the risen Jesus. Most of us, have felt the loneliness and devastation of loss, just like Mary. We have wondered if we can continue. We go through the darkest valley and face the

emptiness of life. And so often, it is through our tears, that we experience the risen Christ. Perhaps among all the names that Jesus is called in the Bible, Gardener could be added.

*After World War II a U.S. Army officer and his wife were stationed in Japan. The country had been devastated by the war and bombings. The economy was in shambles. Unemployment approached 60%. Every day, people came to the Army wife's door looking for work. One man said that he could do wonders for her garden if she would give him a chance. For the first time in her life, the woman hired a gardener. He spoke no English, but the wife, through sign language and pencil and paper gave him instructions about where to plant, prune, and pamper her garden. He listened politely and followed her instructions exactly. The garden emerged as the finest in the neighborhood. When she finally realized that her new gardener knew far more about the matter than she, the wife stopped giving him directions and let him freely care for the garden. It was magnificent. Then one day the gardener came with an interpreter who expressed the appreciation of the gardener. "He will no longer be able to care for your garden. He must leave." The wife expressed her regrets and thanked him for making her garden so beautiful. She asked the interpreter, "Where is he going?" The interpreter replied that the gardener was returning to his old job as... Professor of Horticulture at the University of Tokyo .*

Imagine the look on her face when she discovered who her gardener was. We are like that too aren't we when we experience an encounter with the risen Christ, with our gardener. Frederick Buechner: *"It is not the absence of Jesus from the empty tomb that moves us. It is his presence in our empty hearts."* It's when Jesus shows up in our longing, in the midst of our cynicism and doubt that we begin to believe.

At each stage in the story something new is revealed, some new part of the mystery of New Life is set before Mary, until the full recognition dawns in the moment of personal encounter with Jesus. The recognition of Resurrection does not happen all at once, but is a process which unfolds as she takes in each new moment of experience. The recognition of Resurrection comes to us today just as gradually. Like coaxing a flower or plant out of the soil after the winter. When I think about growing things, I become a bit cynical that a miracle can happen out of the ground, but the invitation is to plant anyway, just like God has planted a seed in our hearts.

Kent Keith wrote a poem called "Anyway": Mother Teresa had it framed on her wall.

*"People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. Love them anyway!*

*The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway!*

*Honesty makes you vulnerable. Be honest anyway!*

*What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway!*

*People really need help but may attack you if you help them. Help them anyway!*

*If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway!"*

This is what God as our master gardener has done with our lives – planted anyway, loved anyway.

*One of my favorite movies: The Color Purple.* The main character, Celie, is a poor black woman who has been abused all her life. *But* she has somebody in her life who loves her; her sister Nettie, who gets chased away by Celie's violent husband, Albert. Albert doesn't let Celie ever see the mail, so Celie never hears from Nettie and starts to believe her sister is dead. *But* Nettie isn't dead. As a missionary in Africa, she writes letters to Celie over the years; she never gets a reply, *but* she keeps writing letters, *anyway.* Then, one day, Celie finds the packet of letters that Albert has hidden. *"Dear Celie, I know you think I am dead. But I am not. Over the years, I been writing to you, , but Albert said you'd never hear from me again. Since I never heard from you all this time, I guess he was right. There is*

*so much to tell you, but if this do get through, one thing I want you to know, I love you, and I am not dead.*" I am *not* dead, and you *are* loved. Celie suffers terrible childhood abuse from her father, and further abuse through her forced marriage to a violent man, has her babies taken away from her and her sister driven from her, *but* God loves Celie, and her life is transformed *anyway*.

Just like Nettie, God keeps writing to us, keeps gardening in our souls. Just like Nettie, Jesus is alive, and keeps loving us. Doesn't the Word of God sustain us in hospital beds and waiting rooms alike, at gravesites and in the longest night of deep agony, doesn't this Word comfort us and challenge us, guide us and surprise? Isn't this really why we're here this morning? Don't we come and hope to hear a Word from God, for our questions, our struggles and problems, "anyway"?

Easter is God's *Yes* to Jesus and to new life and new creation and to us. When the world said or says no to Jesus and to new life and new creation, to reconciliation and peace and justice and healing and mercy, God says *yes anyway* and raises up our hope once again. Jesus says, *I love you, and I am not dead*.

Never get so focused on the empty tomb that you forget to speak to the gardener. This is our story: Christ has risen! The Gardener has returned! He is calling you by name. Alleluia!

Let us pray:

Jesus Christ, our Gardener: We thank you for coming to us in the garden of our lives, where we have been standing and weeping because we thought your divine presence had died within us. We thank you for coming gently, in your loving humanity, full of personal care and tenderness for our most secret thoughts and our deepest feelings.

Blessed Spirit of Creation, give us the courage to enter the tomb of our own souls, to bring to life within us the buried hopes and dreams for love and mercy, meaning and joy. Help us to find the seed buried in the darkness of our fears and failures, to water and nurture its growth and unfolding, and to wait patiently for the flowering of delicate white blossoms seeking the sun. So may it be. Amen.