

“Come and See”

John 20: 1-18

April 4, 2021

Easter Sunday

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie Osterhoudt

I read an Easter story many years ago and each year I love to bring it forth, dust it off and find joy in re-telling it.

It was a nice sunny spring Sunday morning after church had let out. My sister and I were playing separately in the back yard. Suddenly, there was a frantic thrashing in the bushes in our backyard, which got our attention. Out of the bushes bounded our golden retriever, hmm let's call him Max, ferociously shaking a black and white lop-eared rabbit.

My sister and I were horrified. The rabbit belonged to Mrs. Smith who lived next door. Mrs. Smith was an elderly widow and the rabbit was her constant companion and much beloved. There was nothing for us to do but go and tell Dad. We knew he had a talent for mending fences and fixing screened doors, so maybe he could fix Mrs. Smith's poor rabbit that was now lying deathly still on the ground in front of our family dog.

“Don't panic, don't get overly excited. Let's think our way through this.” Dad believed that you could think your way through anything. Dad studied our problem and then told us to “gently hose off the little fellow so he looks nice and clean. Brush him gently with a towel and lay him back in his cage on Mrs. Smith's back porch.” We knew that Mrs. Smith attended a later church service and she was not home yet. Dad

explained, “When she comes home and discovers her rabbit dead, she will be upset but she will figure he just died a natural death. And, oh yes, put the dog in the house!”

We did exactly as we were told and then we hid in the bushes to watch for Mrs. Smith to arrive home. Sure enough, just as Dad said, we saw her come out of the back door and head for the rabbit cage. All of a sudden, we heard the worst screaming you can imagine. Mrs. Smith was hollering and crying and asking God all kinds of question. My Mom and Dad came running out of our house and into her backyard to plead with Mrs. Smith to calm down. They finally got her quiet and relayed how sorry we all were about the death of her rabbit. In between sniffs and sobs she finally got it out: “You don’t understand; I buried that rabbit three days ago.”

New life, resurrection, life with infinite possibilities; a God who has power over life and death – that is what our Easter faith invites/challenges us to believe.

Let’s hear the story which is at the heart of our faith – the story of the resurrection as it is recounted for us by the gospel writer of John.

Prayer for Understanding: God of empty tombs; God of promises fulfilled; loving Creator of all things, roll away the stones that lock us in tombs of prejudice, limited vision, and unbelief. Help us recognize Christ in our midst, that we may feel your touch, hear your Word, and be moved to run and tell. Amen.

Read John 20

Our scripture reading begins at the tomb where they laid Jesus on the day he was crucified. Early on Sunday, after the Sabbath had passed, in those pre-dawn hours before the sun rose above the horizon, Mary Magdalene, friend and faithful follower of Jesus, is

drawn to the garden where Jesus' battered, bruised and lifeless body had been placed. She had been there at the foot of the cross – experiencing an unimaginable darkness - witnessed Jesus' agony; watched him die an excruciating death. She observed as Joseph of Arimathea asked if he could remove Jesus' lifeless body from the cross and place it in a garden belonging to his family; in a burial tomb before the Sabbath began at sundown. Early on Sunday morning, Mary is drawn to the grave site of the one she has loved so very much.

What she discovers there at the tomb shocks and disturbs her. The stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away. She reasons that the body of her beloved has been stolen. After confirming that the tomb is indeed empty, Mary weeps. Who would have done such a despicable thing – to remove a lifeless body from a final resting place? Mary runs to tell the disciples what she has discovered and then Peter and the beloved disciple run to the empty tomb – a footrace to see who will get there first. In John's account of the resurrection there is a lot of frenzied running around before the disciples return home, to continue whatever it was they were doing before Mary breathlessly interrupted them. And Mary, Mary is finally left alone to grieve the death of her friend. As Mary weeps, Jesus, risen from the dead, approaches her. I believe it is significant that the risen Jesus comes to Mary in the midst of her deepest despair. Only Mary, failing to recognize him, mistakes Jesus for the gardener.

I have always been intrigued with this image of Jesus as the Gardener. I believe that the gospel writer was intentional about choosing this imagery. What truths can we glean from the image of Jesus as Gardener? Is it merely coincidental that Jesus begins his new life walking through a garden? Is there any connection between the first Garden of

Eden and John's garden? The New Testament writers often describe Jesus as the Second Adam, because Jesus was able to be and do what God had intended for Creation all along; what the first Adam failed to be and do, living fully for God, loving neighbor and self.

To garden is to take part in mystery of life. This morning I want to explore the mystery of gardening and maybe we can discern some truths inherent in this imagery.

The first truth any gardener recognizes is that the "earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" as the Psalmist says. It all began in Eden. In the four words, "God planted a garden" is a foundational Biblical truth. It is God who creates the garden and He is the master gardener. It is God who plants, whose initiating power brings into being the world which is our home. The real gardener is neither the farmer who grows acres and acres of wheat nor the garden club president noted for her roses but the Creator of the universe. According to Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar and professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, says: "The destiny of the human creature is to live in God's world, not a world of his or her own making. The human creation is to live with God's other creatures, some of which are dangerous, but all of which are to be ruled and cared for. The destiny of the human creature is to live in God's world, with God's other creatures, on God's terms." Is the gospel writer subtly reminding us that even as we stand by the side of a grave, at the door of the tomb – a tomb that represents everything that is evil, corrupt, unjust, cruel in our world - that it is still God's world. As Christians we are reminded that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

Another truth which the gardener understands is the cycle of seasons, the cycle of life. In the winter, we would believe that life dies. But in truth, winter is the time when much activity is occurring below the ground, beyond what the eye can see. A gardener

recognizes the seasons of life as a cycle and trusts that new life is stirring in each cycle. “For everything there is a season, a time for every matter under heaven, a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted.” Jesus himself said “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Time is not linear but cyclical according to the scriptures.

Some years ago, our family vacationed in Northern California and spent a day in the magnificent redwood forests. The giant trees were incredibly beautiful and awesome. We discovered from the forest rangers that the trees produced a pod like seed. The outer hull of the pod was so tough that fire was the only way that the pods could be opened. During forest fires the pods would explode sending forth seed for new life. New life in the redwood forests can only occur when fire destroys existing life. New life is possible only when we stand at the tomb. The resurrection can occur only after death.

Could it be that Jesus the Gardener is reminding us of the cycles of life and our need to be patient and trust God’s seasons? Trust that new life will emerge from the tombs that bury us?

The gardener also teaches us about hope. To garden is to take part in mystery. To place seeds on the waiting earth, cover them with soil, moisten them and to wait in hope is a statement of faith about the creative power of God to bring forth new life in the midst of our grief and despair.

Some years ago, I listened to a sermon preached by the Dr. Joanna Adams, Presbyterian pastor from Atlanta, and she shared this story. It was a story revolving around a young boy, who was maybe 8 or 10 years old. This child’s family home had burned to the ground one tragic night; all the family members had survived by the body was horribly

burned. As he recovered, he spent many weeks in the hospital. In those first frightening days after the fire, his condition began to improve but the young boy did not wake up. The doctors and nurses were beginning to be baffled as to why he did not appear to be regaining consciousness. The young boy's teacher, after hearing that he was improving and the parents were allowing limited visitation, decided to go and visit him in the hospital. When she arrived at the nurses' station, they warned her that he had not regained consciousness. Determined, she opened the door to his room and sat down next to his bedside. She had brought a book bag with her and she pulled out the homework assignments which he had missed and began to go over them. After receiving no response, the teacher left the boy's book bag there in the hospital room. Several days later the boy's mother called the teacher and excitedly explained that her son had opened his eyes and began to speak shortly after the teacher's visit. The mother commented, "my son explained to us that he thought he was going to die until your visit. After your visit, he knew he would recover because you had gone to the trouble of bringing his homework assignments to him." We never know when our words and our actions will communicate hope in the midst of despair and the possibility of new life when surrounded by death.

In the garden, Mary eventually recognizes the risen Lord in her midst. Wrapping her arms around him, she wants to cling to him. And who can blame her? Sometimes the world out there is terrifying, tragic, and unjust. Hanging on to Jesus is a way we can perhaps control the chaos of our lives. But Jesus, disentangling her arms from around him, tells her she cannot hold on to him. Rather she must go forth into that world from which she came, and proclaim the good news of his new life in the midst of cruel, tragic death. Mary obeys, running as fast as her legs will carry her, to proclaim to the disciples: "I have

seen the risen Lord. I've seen him; he is no longer dead, but alive!" You and I are also called by Christ to proclaim to the world – not only in words, but even more importantly in the choices we make, the manner in which we live our lives – that the world belongs to God. And that nothing in life or death, height or depth, nothing ever can separate us from the love of God. And because God loves us, God raised this crucified, battered and bruised Jesus, to new life. He lives. He is not here in the tomb. But goes before you. And because he lives, you shall live also. Do we believe it? Are we living our lives as Easter people, believing in the power of God to make all things new?