

“The Most Surprising Gardener”

Sermon by Rev. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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John 20:1-18

Last month, in the Christian quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City, the unveiling of a restoration project that had taken 9 months-- the time it takes for a mother to gestate a fetus before she gives birth-- revealed Jesus tomb. The site is shared between six different Christian denominations: Syrian Orthodox, Franciscan, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, and Greek Orthodox. In order to keep neutrality between these diverse Christian groups, a Muslim family has held the keys to the shrine for generations. Disagreements about which custodians should hold responsibility for repair work on the shrine have let it deteriorate for 50 years. Now, however, they have coordinated their efforts, so that within the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, within the chapel that protectively houses beneath a marble slab that was placed over the tomb 500 years ago, titanium beams now support the limestone bench in the cave where we suppose Jesus’ body had been laid. For just 60 hours in the restoration project, researchers had the opportunity to examine this holiest of sites.

But before there were titanium beams, or any marble slab, or a chapel, or a Church of the Holy Sepulchre, there was just a garden, and a cave. Only John’s gospel mentions that Jesus’ tomb was in a garden.

We live in The Garden State, and for those who garden, you know gardens are places of both death and life. In gardens right now we witness the peaking of tulips and the cheerfulness of daffodils, but we also know gardens are places of death and decomposition-- you only have to look for the compost in the corner or the bugs and worms that break down old plants into new dirt. One church member has mentioned her family member plans to pick up horse manure from the Overpeck Equestrian Center to nourish your family’s spring garden-- much to her dismay. In John’s gospel we see key events in Jesus’ last hours occur in a

garden: It is in a garden that Judas betrays Jesus, and it is in a garden that Jesus is crucified.

Mary Magdalene had arrived at the garden first, to find the tomb, even before night had lifted. She saw that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb entry. She never stops to see the empty clothes. She ran to Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, telling them “*They* have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him!” I wonder who Mary assumes *they* are: the Roman authorities? Looters? The Religious leaders? Someone else who laid a claim on Jesus’ love, who had taken his body to anoint and vouchsafe it?

The Beloved Disciple arrives at the tomb’s entry first, but he stays at the tomb’s entrance. Simon Peter, who always has to see for himself, goes right in and sees the abandoned clothes, sees that the body is missing. The disciple whom Jesus loved only enters the tomb after Simon Peter first checks it out. As an aside, the disciple whom Jesus loved stayed anonymous and appears only in John’s gospel. Some suppose he could have been the disciple John; others imagine him to be Lazarus, or Jesus’ brother James. Still others-- including 2 gnostic gospels found at Nag Hammadi-- claim that the disciple whom Jesus loved was Mary Magdalene; the fact that both Mary and the beloved disciple play different roles in this story may be an editorial choice John made to conceal Mary’s role as a disciple. As a literary device, we could also imagine ourselves in the role of the disciple whom Jesus loved. When the disciple whom Jesus loved went into the tomb, he saw and believed-- even though the scripture says that disciple and Simon Peter “as yet did not understand the scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead.” Together, they went off to their homes.

As for Mary, she just stood weeping *outside* of the tomb. She doesn’t seem fazed by the 2 angels who appear when she peers into the tomb-- still standing on the outside. They ask Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?” -- and without skipping a beat, she replies to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him!”

Turning around, Mary sees none other but Jesus himself-- yet she doesn’t recognize him. He also asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you

looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, Mary questions him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Not until Jesus speaks the name of Mary, his disciple, does she hear, see and receive who he truly is and what has truly happened.

Barbara Lunblad notes that John is the only gospel that places this tomb scene in a garden. To her, this scene evokes Jesus’ gardening lesson from John 12: “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.”¹

Perhaps Mary’s assuming Jesus to be the gardener is not entirely off base. Throughout his relationships and teachings, Jesus sows the seeds of faith that will lead us to grow toward the sunlight of God’s love. Depending on what we bring to that relationship with Jesus, the ways that seed of faith may take root will differ. Even as I get to know this congregation I have now been serving for one year, I realize I could ask any three people what Jesus means to them, they would probably give three-- or more-- different answers, depending on how that seed of faith has been sown and grown in them. We Presbyterians and those of other traditions we have collected along the way tend to be more of a garden of wildflowers than a carefully controlled and preserved rose garden, as we each respond to who Jesus is and in our lives and in relation to the world; and some of us still have yet to bloom.

The import of what happened that Sunday morning broke into the disciples’ and Mary’s understanding in different ways, as it probably does with you. Are you like the Beloved Disciple, who rushed to arrive first at the tomb but does not go inside unless someone else first shows you the way? Some of us are like that; that is why we believe connection is so important at Presbyterian Church in Leonia. We connect youth and children with Sunday School leaders; we bond over activities like Karaoke, bowling, or a nature hike not only to goof off and have fun, but to also experience holy hospitality and laughter. We serve together and share our generosity with the community and as we do so, we begin to see a bit more of

¹ Barbara Lunblad, “Commentary on John 20:1-18” in www.workingpreacher.org, March 27, 2016

who Jesus is. We sometimes get a newcomer who has come to Christianity as an adult, and I love it when this happens because it challenges us to share our faith afresh to someone already wized to life's ways.

Are you more like Simon Peter, who has to see for himself, who ventures into the tomb and has to gather the evidence? Many of us, from youngest to oldest, also want some kind of proof. That is why we do not ask you to check your brains at the door when you come to church. Next week we will hear a testimony from JunHee Han, as he couples our reading of doubting Thomas with some aspects of faith that has challenged him the most. We admit these stories can seem impossible, and while we do not have the wrappings of Jesus' risen body lying around the church grounds, some of you have found evidence of Jesus' resurrected presence in the sacrament of communion we share in memory of Jesus' body and blood, or in the ways Jesus may appear in the bodies and lives of the poor who we serve in our community.

Are you more like Mary, who-- even presented face to face with Jesus-- will not recognize him until he says her name? Have past traumas or disappointments blinded you to God, who appears right before your eyes? Many of us are like Mary. Perhaps Mary replayed the troubling images over and over, so that she could not see Jesus before her-- not until he called her name, "Mary!" And so we who are like Mary keep before us the waters of baptism, in which we are named and nurtured before Jesus Christ. These waters have known us in floods and storms, as well as in our birth, cleansing, and quenching. The waters of baptism are not a one-time event, but they stay with us our whole lives, claiming us into the grace of a God who knows our names.

This Easter Sunday, may Jesus press into our doubts and into our faith, so that we grow beyond our fears of death, of defeat, of despair.

This time last year, in the African country Ivory Coast, dozens of people recently gathered for singing and dancing on the beach, one week after terrorists killed 19 people in that place. It was their act of resistance to violence. A woman, Sylla, brought her 3 children to join in the festivities, saying "We're not afraid of those

terrorists and won't stay locked up at home," she says. "Jamais, never, never, never afraid. Non. No, no, never afraid." ²

Perhaps many of us cannot cast aside our fears with the same abandon as the Ivorian dancers. But maybe with Jesus' help, we can see the power of what God can do in the gardens of our lives. Today, on Easter, we proclaim God's power to bring life out of death, despair and destruction. May this life take root in us and make us faithful. Amen.

² Ofeibea Quist-Arcton, "A Day at the Beach Is A Way of Saying 'We're Not Afraid' of Terrorists." *NPR*, March 24, 2016