John 20:1-18
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Make This Place Beautiful

As I have mentioned to many of you, I'm not a gifted gardener—quite the opposite in fact. My mother was, as was her father. I am not. I've had some luck with a planter one of you gave me a few years back. It seems to do ok with the flowers I transplant there every spring, and it still manages to keep putting forth green shoots of its own. One little container garden is about all I can handle on my own.

The last thing we heard from the gospel of John on Friday evening was that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus placed Jesus' crucified body in the tomb. John also tells us that "in the place *where Jesus was crucified* there was a garden."[1] A garden? I know Mary finds Jesus, or rather Jesus finds Mary in a garden outside the tomb, but I had not noticed that the cross was right there, too. And it's apparently not a surprise garden, planted inadvertently by passing birds, but an intentional one. One source suggests that the Greek word used here "designates a cultivated plot—an enclosed garden or orchard—set aside for the nurturing of valuable plants, trees, or vines."[2] So somebody planted this place with "valuable plants" on purpose and tends to it faithfully, cultivating beauty and goodness, in the shadow of at least one cross, one of humanity's worst forms of torture, cruelty, and death.

I've wondered before why Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener. Like other preachers I've made corny if not cringey comments about him wearing a floppy hat or a pair of colorful gloves. But maybe it's Mary's dawning realization that someone has to be tending to the flowers and the fruit trees;

[1] John 19:41, NRSVue, emphasis added
[2] https://biblehub.com/greek/2779.htm

someone has to be working to bring beauty to this desolate place. And she gives credit to the only other earthly person present in that place in the wee hours of that Sunday morning. Sunday is also the first day of the week, as John reminds us. Sunday was the day people got back to work following the sabbath. It would make sense that the gardener was back at work, too, early in the morning before the heat of the day. And while John has a deep affection for words, I don't think his telling us that it is the first day is a throwaway comment. The gardener is at work on that first day, echoing the first first day that Dakeita read about in Genesis. After all, there was a garden there, too. In the beginning, on the first day, God was at work creating beauty out of chaos, separating light from dark, and it was good.

Like many of you, every year around this time I make my way to Memorial Garden to see the tulips and everything else that is bursting with life and beauty. This year I also managed to slow down and wander through the columbarium, reading the names and thanking God for the saints I know and the ones I don't, and recalling the moments when we gathered to say good-bye and to give them back to the God to whom they always belonged and still do. I was back in Memorial Garden again on Good Friday late in the afternoon, and it was bustling with families and the clicks of cameras. Students were having their senior photos taken in graduation gowns, letterman jackets, and the occasional prom dress. Families were toting toddlers in their smocked finest and cajoling them to smile one more time. Older folks leaned on walkers or on a grandchild's strong arm as they made their way together toward the fountain, a path I sense they have walked for years now. And all the while, weathered tomb stones tilted in the background while the columbarium offered a shaded spot for quiet reflection. In other words, even with all this life swirling around, reminders of death are not far away. Just as it is in John.

On Easter we in the church make bold claims about death being defeated, about life and love having the final word, and I believe that in my core. I also recognize perhaps more and more with each

passing year, that defeating death does not mean that death is not still present, or that everything is shiny and perfect and unblemished because of Easter or in the wake of Christ's resurrection. It is not. Wars and famine still rage. Hatred and division persist. Illness and fractured relationships and addiction and, yes, death are still very present outside that garden and inside it, too. Maybe Jesus is in fact a gardener, a gardener who is still very much at work. He is watering, tending, and feeding, planning and weeding, cultivating life, nurturing bold, extravagant, unstoppable beauty in the face of death, in the shadow of his own cross, redeeming and renewing the whole of creation.

That sounds nice, of course, but what does that look like for us? What does it mean for this embattled world in which you and I live? After he calls her by name, Mary is overcome with shock and joy and maybe a bit of fear. She wants to cling to him, to grab hold of him and not let him out of her sight. I get it. *Can't we just put roots down right here, Jesus? Tend to this little corner and leave it at that?* But no. It was never only about one little garden. Jesus commissions Mary to a new task that extends beyond that one patch: go and tell. Witness to what you have seen about life that is stronger than death. Tell them what you know about love that no tomb can contain. Let them know that the cross wasn't the end of the story.

All week, a poem by Maggie Smith has been swirling in my heart and my brain. A portion of it reads:

> Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
> Life is short, and I've shortened mine
> in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
> a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
> I'll keep from my children. The world is at least

fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative

estimate, though I keep this from my children.

For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.

… Life is short and the world

is at least half terrible, and for every kind

stranger, there is one who would break you,

though I keep this from my children. I am trying

to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,

walking you through a real [dump], chirps on

about good bones: This place could be beautiful,

right? You could make this place beautiful.[3]

That's the invitation the risen Christ extends. *You could make this place beautiful. Let's make this place beautiful.* Yes, the world is often terrible and cruel and battered and a mess. There are crosses everywhere, more tombs than I can begin to count, and more broken hearts and lives than I dare to admit. The poet says she keeps such things from her children. There are many days when I work overtime to hide such things from myself.

And yet the God we meet in Jesus Christ sees all of it and all of us very clearly That same God sends his Son not into an idealized, sanitized place but into this very world to save it, to redeem it, to recreate it, out of love for us and for that same world in its entirety, terrible parts and all. God's new creation is not simply about perfect beds around beautiful fountains. God's new creation pushes back

[3] Maggie Smith, "Good Bones." Please note, the full poem contains some unsavory language. https://poets.org/poem/good-bones

against death-dealing powers in the dandelion that springs up through the asphalt, in the sunflower that sprouts beside a desolate road, in community gardens that flourish in struggling communities. God's new creation is not simply pretty or decorative; it is not window dressing; it is a stubborn, fierce force fueled by love and justice. God's new creation will not be crushed, nor will it be confined to one space or domesticated by any one nation or people. God's new creation is not a container garden; it is an unstoppable power; it is an uncontainable garden in fact. No tomb can hold it; no cross can crush it.

And on this first day, the gardener is back at work, determined to bring life where death and despair have tried to stake their claim. Even now, Christ commissions us alongside Mary to join him in nurturing the new creation. Even now, he is calling us to go tell the others, to roll up our sleeves, put on our floppy hats, get messy, plant seeds of love, justice, hope, truth, joy, and peace, and get back to work here in God's uncontainable garden. By the grace of God and in the power of our Risen Lord, together we can make this place beautiful.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.