

Easter Sunday 2019
John 20:1-18

Behold the man who died and who now lives. His heart had stopped, but again pulses with a new rhythm and vigor. His veins spilled their crimson contents all over the Golgotha ground but now course with a fresh supply of warm, red, oxygenated blood. His lungs were deflated and flat after that loud cry with which He yielded up His spirit, but now they expand and fill with the perfumed, stale, air of the tomb. His eyes were closed in death, but now open and squint to take in the darkness of the grave. His hands had been nailed to the cross, but now they spread all ten living fingers open before picking up the grave cloths and folding them. His feet had dragged lifelessly as His body was placed into the tomb, but now they reach to the ground and plant ten living toes into the cool dirt. His skin had cooled to the cool temperature of the stone-and-dirt grave, but now radiates heat and warmth -- though it still shows five distinct wounds from nails and a spear. His brain had been still and dead, but now electrons dance and neurons sparkle. His stomach, which hasn't eaten since Thursday, growls and suggests somewhat urgently that the Lenten fast is over. Behold, the man, Jesus, God and man, lives. He rises triumphantly from the dead and strolls out of the grave into His creation.

And Mary mistakes Him for the gardener. It's an honest mistake, really. She was understandably confused. She showed up first, while it was still dark and the disciples were asleep. She probably hadn't slept for days. As soon as day began to break after the Sabbath had ended, she went to the tomb. When she saw that the stone had been taken away, dislodged from what its permanent resting place, she ran and told the disciples. She found Peter and John first, and the words came crashing

out so quickly, it's any wonder they understood her at all, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

They all went back to the tomb, Peter and John sprinting. John doesn't bother to tell us whether Mary Magdalene ran or walked. But when the men wandered away bewildered, she remained. She stayed outside weeping, grieving at the double loss. First, the One she called Lord was crucified. Now, His body was missing. The angels are perplexed at her weeping, "Why are you weeping?" Her distress is wrong, not part of her honest mistake. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Then she turned around and beheld the Risen Lord. He asked her the very same question as the angels: "Why are you weeping?" and added, "Whom are you seeking?"

Of course, she thought He was the gardener. This was an honest mistake. It's not a mistake to confuse Jesus with a gardener. The mistake is to confuse Jesus with this gardener, the caretaker of this cemetery. Jesus is no caretaker of cemeteries. In fact, He is quite the adversary to anyone who wants to keep cemeteries neat and orderly, who wants graves undisturbed, who wants peace and quiet maintained. There is a gardener, a caretaker for those things. But, Jesus is not that man.

There are many caretakers for the cemetery of the world. Maintaining a cemetery is part of our earthly industry of mortality that we have built around ourselves to shield us from the stinging reality of death. We disguise the cold reality of a dead body to make it look as lifelike as possible. Then there's the casket and the vault to spare us the reality of dealing with a decomposing body. And then, we have those silly, stupid euphemisms: "He has passed on." "She's in a better place." "He's watching over you." "Heaven needed another lady in its bowling league."

Try as we might, we can never take away the cold reality that death is a rupturing of God's perfect creation.

The truly sad fact is that our culture even promotes death. The strong are encouraged to eliminate the weak. Mothers are persuaded that it is more convenient to kill their unborn children rather than shouldering the burden of being a parent. As soon as our elderly and our infirm show any sign that they cannot care for themselves, our culture contends they are better off dead. Vengeance is yours. Suicide is noble. We do not suffer well. We want happiness at all costs. Efficiency is our idol. And nothing is more efficient than death.

The *Didache*, a first-century compilation of the teaching of the apostles, describes the culture of death like this:

And the way of death is this: First of all it is evil and full of curse: murders, adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, magic arts, witchcrafts, rapines, false witnessings, hypocrisies, double-heartedness, deceit, haughtiness, depravity, self-will, greediness, filthy talking, jealousy, over-confidence, loftiness, boastfulness; persecutors of the good, hating truth, loving a lie, not knowing a reward for righteousness, not cleaving to good nor to righteous judgment, watching not for that which is good, but for that which is evil; from whom meekness and endurance are far, loving vanities, pursuing requital, not pitying a poor man, not laboring for the afflicted, not knowing Him that made them, murderers of children, destroyers of the handiwork of God, turning away from him that is in want, afflicting him that is distressed, advocates of the rich, lawless judges of the poor, utter sinners. Be delivered, children, from all these.¹

There is nothing new under the sun. Death does not become you as a child of God. "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Death is

¹ *Didache* [*The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*], Ch. 5: "The Way of Death," ANF 7:379.

the penalty for our first parents rebelling about the source of life, our Creator. Now, we are more inclined to death than life; in fact, in the folly of our fallen reason, we even see death as a natural part of life.

Do you recall what happened after our first parents ate? They fled from the gardener. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden, and they hid, fearing for their lives. The God who had created them with His Word; who had scooped Adam out of the fresh, fertile soil; who had planted a garden called Eden and put His humans in the garden to subdue it; now strikes terror into the hearts of these be-your-own-gods rebels. And He should. He is life. They chose death. Adam became the first gardener of death, and the mere existence of the **gardener of life** made him afraid for his life.

Since then, the tension between Creator and his creatures has been a clash of life versus death. But it didn't stop the divine gardener from taking a stroll in His creation. So it should be no surprise to us that when the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus, when the Creator took an extended stroll in His creation, He exercised the skill and patience of a master gardener as He walked the rows. Behold the man who tends His garden, who, everywhere He went, pulled the weeds of blindness and paralysis, leprosy and death, unbelief and rebellion. Behold the man who sowed the seed of His Word, the news of the new reign of life, swallowing up the reign of death. He promised life, but it would come through death -- specifically, His death.

And so when Mary Magdalene beheld the man who created the Garden of Eden, who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and who was dead and buried in a garden, she made the honest mistake of assuming that He was just another man, just another gardener in the gardens of

death. But He is not. Oh yes, He is a gardener, but of a completely different sort.

So here we are, My Dear Friends in Christ, at the dawn of His resurrection, overcoming the shadows of death by His resurrection this 3rd day, beholding the man who rose from the dead to destroy death's stranglehold in His good creation.

Behold the crucified and risen Christ; the grain of wheat fallen dead into the earth; that now bears the fruit of new life for you. He is the gardener of His new heavens and new earth, the caretaker of the culture of new, resurrection life.

Behold the man who gives life. Behold the man with the authority to take His own life back up again. Believe in His bodily resurrection and your own, already begun in the waters of Holy Baptism, but not completed until the day of His return. Behold the man who answers the culture of death by destroying death. Behold the man whose resurrection has removed the sting of death. Behold the man whose resurrection means your resurrection. Behold the man who today feeds you with the only body that rose from the dead in victory over death. Behold the man. And in Him, behold yourself, holy and whole, forgiven and free. In Him, behold the man or woman you are now and will be fully when He raises your very flesh from the grave.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!