



## “Graveyards and Gardens”

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*John 20:1-18*

When we lived in Atlanta, my wife, Amanda, created and led an enrichment class for preschool-aged children. Seven children from our neighborhood would meet at our house two mornings a week to sing songs, hear children’s stories, create art, cook, experience nature, and actively learn through outdoor play. Well, one of the outside activities was to plant some romaine lettuce at the side of the house, tend to it, and watch it grow. Amanda got the kids excited by telling them that they would eventually be able to pick it, make a salad with it, and eat it together during their lunchtime.

Two days after the kids planted these young lettuce plants, Amanda was in the yard picking up toys after a long day of preschool fun when she got to the side of the house with the garden and noticed that the baby lettuce was gone. Did the birds eat it? Maybe it was the squirrels... or the rabbits? A confused Amanda went to our oldest daughter, Annaleigh, to inquire if she had seen the animal that had destroyed this young crop. And do you know who ate the lettuce? If you guessed that the animals were seven preschool-aged children, you would be right. The kids couldn’t wait to eat the little lettuce leaves so they picked them and ate them that day. The children didn’t realize that the tiny plants in their garden would eventually grow and that the reward and the harvest would be so much bigger and better than the little starter plants. They could only see what was right in front of them and did not know that there would be tough days, hot days, dry days, drenching days, and cold days that would help make the harvest of lettuce much sweeter.

Gardens are important places. They are important places in the Bible too. I bet we can all think of two important gardens right off the top of our heads—the Garden of Eden and the Garden of Gethsemane. As the Bible opens in a newly created garden, all things are bright and beautiful. And at the end of every day, God delighted in the goodness of creation. At the highpoint of God’s creative work, were human beings who bore the very image of God. In this Garden of Eden, God was the chief gardener who invited human beings to join in creating and caring for a diversity of plants and animals. The Garden of Eden was the place where God resurrected life from the swirling depths of chaos and nothingness. The garden was the place of life.

There is also another prominent garden in the Bible, the Garden of Gethsemane. This garden was not one of life, but one of suffering. Jesus was in distress and bargained with God to take the cup of death away from him. This garden was one watered with his tears as he felt separated from God, isolated and anguished. He was also abandoned by his friends who succumbed to sleep rather than keeping watch. This particular garden felt more like a graveyard as Jesus faced judgment, torture, and eventually death. The blood wouldn’t only be on the cross, it would drip off Jesus’s brow in Gethsemane as he intensely prayed. The garden had become a graveyard.

Our Easter text for today places us in a third garden, a garden that is also a graveyard and a garden that is no less significant than the two already mentioned. The story begins in the early morning darkness, when the dawning sky was still dim like a closed tomb. Although Mary Magdalene was in a garden, this garden felt more like a graveyard after a horrendous couple of days where she witnessed the world's cruelest behaviors, power structures, and political positions. She was in the cemetery of her spirit and she came to the garden in the darkness of the morning and in the graveyard of her grief.

And so, we pick up the story when Mary was just outside of the empty tomb, inconsolable and weeping. She was experiencing deep loss and piercing pain and she couldn't see the angels and she couldn't see the Christ right in front of her. Mary searched for Jesus in the only place she knew where to look. She peered into the tomb where the grave cloths had been transformed into angels. But she was too overwhelmed by grief to see the heavenly beings. She was too flooded by fear to notice anything but the missing body of her Lord. And the angels didn't seem to faze her. One preacher says that she "treat[ed] them like orderlies stripping a hospital bed where you were looking for someone you love." And as the angels, confused by her sadness, asked her why she was crying and so utterly in grief, they probably gave a knowing glance over her shoulder at the person standing behind her. Maybe they cracked a smile as their dancing eyes recognized the special visitor walking in the garden.

Immediately, Mary turned around and saw Jesus. But Mary didn't know it was Jesus. She assumed it was the gardener. She was too broken and alone to see the garden of Eden, the garden of creation and life, and the hope of resurrection. She was lost in the graveyard of doubt and fear. And because she was in the graveyard, she needed someone to help her locate Jesus's body. She needed someone to help her find out who might have stolen her savior. So, she asked the gardener the same question she asked the angels, not expecting news of new life or resurrection, but simply, "Where is Jesus? Where have they taken him?" But Jesus was ready to teach Mary a gardening lesson. You see, earlier in the Gospel of John we recall that Jesus had spoken a parable about gardening: "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." Death wasn't the end, it was the beginning. The graveyard wasn't the conclusion of this story.

Easter is about more than an empty tomb. Easter is more than Mary grieving in the graveyard. We made it through the last supper, the scarring betrayals, the piercing nails, and the shrouded body. But the graveyard was all Mary could see. Her grief was all she could comprehend because she was only peering into the tomb. The sight of Jesus' empty tomb didn't cultivate faith in Mary, it only grew desperation and depression and discouragement within her. Her first thought was not one of flowering resurrection in a thriving garden, but of a body stolen from a desolate graveyard. But again, there is more to Easter than death. There is more to Easter than a dying prophet and an empty tomb. There is more to Easter than a missing messiah. There is more to Easter than the grief of the graveyard. There is a garden where the soil is rich and the harvest is full. There is a garden where life springs forth from the death of the seeds. There is a garden that is tended, cultivated, and loved, and where the gardener knows us each by name.

And Mary didn't believe Jesus to be the gardener until he called her by name. "Mary!" That one word carried with it something of her own crucifixion and resurrection, of her own graveyard to

garden moment. The power of the resurrection was made known in a single word from the lips of her teacher, her friend, not in the echoes of her cries bouncing off the rocky walls of an empty tomb. No, the power of the resurrection stemmed from her deeply personal encounter with the risen Christ. When Jesus called her by name, her eyes were opened, the tears ceased to flow, the grief faded, and she began to live as one in the garden.

Garden moments happen when we hear Jesus calling our names. We need to hear the gardener calling our names because it provides us the possibility of a flourishing and flowering future. Hearing Jesus call our names gives us hope when we feel like our lives are empty tombs and our dreams have been snatched and stolen. Without the gardener, where would the disciples have gone when their hopes were shattered at Golgotha? Without the gardener, what did Mary have to cling to? Without the gardener, what would we do when the marriage is dead, when cancer takes its toll, when suffering strikes, when bullets claim the lives of loved ones, when wars and rumors of wars are more numerous than moments of kindness and love? Without the gardener, there can be no tomorrow and the graveyards become all we can see. But the resurrection story gives us God's "Yes!" in the face of life's darkest tombs. The resurrection gives us God's "Yes!" in the blurriness of our wettest tears. The resurrection gives us God's "Yes!" in the bitterness of our deepest hurts. The resurrection gives us God's loud and resounding "Yes!" in our loneliest and dreariest graveyards. The resurrection unveils the gardens in our lives where Jesus can be seen.

But once we have seen Jesus, we have to let go and move forward into God's good future. We aren't meant to cling to Jesus and stay planted in one spot. Because, every time we think we have a hold of Jesus, he won't stay long because he has places he wants to take us, people he wants us to meet, those he wants us to rescue. Jesus is free, free of the graveyard and roaming at large in the world. Jesus has moved from the graveyard, to the garden, and now to all the world. He will not be confined again. He is on the loose, and we must not hold on too tightly and keep Jesus within our own ideas about who the savior is and what he should be doing. Easter reminds us that Jesus cannot be held down.

Jesus is on the loose in order to free us from every grave we find ourselves in. He wants to release us from the tombs that encase us and enclose us. It is the business of the resurrected Christ to call us out of our false securities, our useless lies, our uninformed hate, our senseless violence, our irrational anger that can become like graves for us. The resurrection of Jesus beckons us to see through our blurry, tear-filled eyes the gardener who wants to sow seeds of hope, of righteousness, of passion, of justice in our lives. The Jesus in John's Gospel wants to move us from the graveyard to the garden, where we can take root, grow, and flourish.

You have heard me quote pastor and author Tony Campolo many times. Some of you are probably familiar with Campolo's famous sermon, "It's Friday, but Sunday's Coming," based on a sermon he once experienced in his home church, a black church in West Philadelphia. Campolo grew up in that church and he was the only white member of the 2,500 member congregation. African-American congregations and pastors have their own unique and wondrous approach to the Gospel message, notes Campolo. And Campolo himself has been deeply affected by that unique approach.

He says he remembers when he went to his first black funeral service. He was seventeen years old. A friend of his named Clarence had died. The minister was magnificent. Campolo described that preacher like this: “He preached about the Resurrection and he talked about life after death in such glowing terms that I have to tell you, even at seventeen I wished I was dead just listening to him! He came down from the pulpit. Then he went over to the family and spoke words of comfort to them. Last of all, he went over to the open casket and for the last twenty minutes, he preached to the corpse. Can you imagine that? He just yelled at the corpse. ‘Clarence! Clarence!’ he yelled. He said it with such authority,” says Campolo, “I would not have been surprised had there been an answer.”

“Well,” this preacher said, “Clarence, you died too fast. You got away without us thanking you.” He went down this litany of beautiful, wonderful things that Clarence had done for people. Then he said, “That’s it, Clarence. When there’s nothin’ more to say, there’s only one thing to say, good night!”

“Now this is drama,” says Campolo. “White preachers can’t do this... [The preacher] grabbed the lid of the casket and he slammed it shut and he yelled, ‘Good night, Clarence! Good night, Clarence!’ As he slammed that lid shut he pointed to the casket and he said, ‘Good night, Clarence, ‘cause I know, yes, I know that God is going to give you a good morning!’ Then the choir stood and started singing ‘On that great gettin’ up morning we shall rise, we shall rise.’ People were up on their feet and they were in the aisles hugging and kissing each other and dancing. I was up dancing and hugging people,” says Campolo. “I knew I was in the right church, the kind of church that can take a funeral and turn it into a celebration. That’s what the faith is about. It’s about the promise of eternal life... death doesn’t threaten us anymore.”

It can’t be expressed any better than that. Some of you might be weeping in a graveyard this day. Maybe it’s the graveyard of a lost lifelong dream. Maybe it’s the graveyard of disappointment or despair. Maybe it’s the graveyard of heartbreak or rejection, or the graveyard of pain and shame. Whatever it is, the grave isn’t the end. Turn around and hear the good news from the master gardener, the one who is calling your name through your tears and through your fears. Listen to his words. Let them blossom within you. And those flowering words of comfort and life, if we choose to listen, will remind us that “where there are nights there are always mornings; where there is death there is resurrection; and where there are graveyards, there are always gardens.”

Alleluia!

Amen.