

Garden Party  
John 20:1-18

Knowing the ending of the story changes the way we receive it. On Good Friday we read scriptures of Jesus' horrible death, and the efforts of a couple of friends to secure his body and find a proper place for burial. Our passage today begins with an even darker possibility. In the predawn darkness, Mary Magdalene comes sorrowfully to the tomb to complete the proper burial duties for Jesus - and discovers the tomb is open - and the body is gone!

Mary assumes someone has broken into the tomb, possibly to make a good deal of money off the body of a famous teacher. It's not an unreasonable guess since potions and powders were sometimes made from the remains of famous people and sold for big money.

The problem is - we know what's coming next. We've seen this movie before. And while that knowledge adds to our understanding, it can take away the drama.

But try, if you can, to erase the fact that you know, that at this point, Jesus has been raised from the dead - that the tomb is empty because he walked out...alive. Instead of thinking it as a place of light and hope, imagine how frightening, how absolutely creepy it would be to approach, in the dark, the place where the dead Jesus lay, hastily wrapped some hours before. And then, imagine the shock of discovering the tomb is empty. There is no body there. Are you in the right place? Or worse - has someone broken into this sacred place and performed a horribly sacrilegious act?

Mary Magdalene was certain she knew what happened: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him" (20:2) is what she told the other disciples.

Now continue to try to forget Jesus is risen. The two men disciples race to the tomb, and then leave. Then Mary returns - to the tomb - and finds one who she understands is the gardener.

There is a garden on the grounds surrounding the tomb...The garden is a powerful symbol in scripture. History begins – where? - in a garden. When our first parents are expelled from that Garden of Eden, a creature of light and fire guards the entrance so that no one may reenter. Isaiah speaks of a garden that was well tended, but ended up overgrown with weeds, as a symbol of God’s people breaking covenant. The Song of Songs uses the image of a garden for the sexual potential of the lovers who court each other, and employs imagery of the need to protect the garden from unlawful entry.

While there is no guard in this garden near the tomb of Jesus - in its own way, it is a garden with the real tree of life. A peaceful place where the resurrection is about to blossom and bloom. It is the garden where Real Life emerges for all to share.

When Mary arrives, she looks into the tomb and sees two angels. But she doesn’t quite get it yet. These angels ask her why she is crying. Mary replies, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him” (20:13).

Mary Magdalene turns away from the two. When she does, she sees someone else whom she mistakes for the gardener who takes care of the grounds surrounding the tomb. The still unrecognized figure asks Mary the same question asked by the angels: “Woman, why are you crying?” Then adds, “Who is it you are looking for?” (20:14). She repeats her fear that the body of Jesus has been stolen. Thinking perhaps this gardener is the culprit, she asks him where he has taken the body.

A touching and powerful scene of revelation follows. Jesus simply says, “Mary,” and she replies with his title, “Rabboni!” And then, though John doesn’t say it in so many words, Mary must have embraced Jesus, because he says these puzzling words: “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet returned to the Father” (20:17).

What do the words of Jesus mean, “Do not hold on to me”? This is a real puzzle...Why not? Why can’t Mary touch Jesus now?

Consider that the risen Jesus will later be very present with other people who love him... Jesus will appear in the upper room: a place of locked doors where they are afraid; a place of unbelief; a place where Jesus will invite one with doubts to touch his wounds. As later stories will affirm, Jesus will be with them where they live and work: eating fish, even preparing the breakfast. Present. Alive.

Perhaps there is the answer. The risen Jesus is not to be found in a sanctuary, a gentle garden, a place of beauty and repose. The risen Jesus wants us to get out of the garden. The risen Jesus is found where we doubt, where we live, where we work, where we question. The message of resurrection belongs out in the world!

The story concludes with Mary rushing off to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord!" Mary becomes the first apostle, the first emissary to carry the news of the risen Christ to the world. She is the source of this proclamation, whose truth the others will see with their own eyes soon enough.

So there it is, before us. We see: as Nicodemus saw, as the woman at the well saw, as Simon and Andrew and Nathaniel (can anything good come from Nazareth?) saw, and as the Beloved Disciple and Mary Magdalene saw. Do you get it? Are you ready to take the risen Jesus out of the garden and into the world? Are you ready to take this good news where people doubt or question, where they work, where they live - which is to say, where you doubt or question, where you work, where you live? There's no angel holding you back. There's no angel forcing you away.

Go! Run! Proclaim! Jesus is risen! Jesus is risen indeed!