

THE GARDENER'S HANDS

Living with the Power of Easter

Genesis 1-3, John 20-1-16; Revelation 20-22

"Thinking He Was the Gardener"

The story is told of a couple that checked in one day to Princeton New Jersey's famous Nassau Inn. Seeing in the lobby a rumpled man they took for the bellhop, one of them barked: *"Take these bags up to our room!"* Dutifully, the man complied. When the customer went to tip him a dollar, the servant politely refused and went on his way. Little did the couple know but their "bellhop" wasn't an employee of the hotel at all. He was a local resident, just passing through the lobby. His name was Albert Einstein.

At the dawn of Easter, it seems like Mary Magdalene makes a similar error of judgment, doesn't it? Mary appears to mistake the risen Christ for some kind of gardener (John 20:15). I submit to you, however, that this story is NOT like the earlier one. It is, in fact, history's greatest case of *unmistaken identity*. Mary's first instincts were right. The person she met that morning was in fact the ultimate Gardener. Let me describe how this is so and why it is such good news for you and me.

As simplistic as this may sound, the THREE MOST IMPORTANT STORIES in the Bible all take place in a garden. Every page of the Bible is worth your attention. But if you only had time to read a tiny portion of this uniquely inspired masterpiece, I would say: *"Read the three stories about the Gardener's Hands."*

The Gardener Creates

The FIRST one is found at the very start of the Bible. It's a story about who God is and what God intended for life to be and what can go wrong. If you think about it, few things are more important than knowing where you come from, what your life is meant to be about, and how you could get off track. Every loving parent seeks to give their children this basic foundation and guidance, right? And so does our loving God.

I suppose God could have told us about life in theological or philosophical terms. He might have said that life is about the ontological effulgence of the divine triunity, which manifests itself phenomenologically to facilitate our epistemological encounter with the teleology made evident in the cosmic etiology, atonement, and coming eschaton. That would be accurate but, as Jesus' teaching style displays, God is not into boring people.

Alternatively, God could have explained life for us in scientific terms. He might have spoken of subatomic particles and the ten dimensions of string theory and the way all this reveals how fundamentally relational all things are, and how our material world is just one plane of existence interpenetrated by a timeless energy and organization no mere randomness could ever explain. But it would be hard for children or early cultures to get that. And, as Jesus shows us again, God wants everyone to know him.

And so, in his infinite kindness, God picks an image that almost everyone of any age, time, or place can readily understand. **"Think of life as a Garden and of me as the Gardener and of yourself as my helper."** This is where the Bible begins. The opening chapters of Genesis picture God as a Being who loves to enter places that are **"formless and empty"** and scatter the seeds of life (Gen 1:1). It portrays him running

Gardener and of yourself as my helper.” This is where the Bible begins. The opening chapters of Genesis picture God as a Being who loves to enter places that are **“formless and empty”** and scatter the seeds of life (Gen 1:1). It portrays him running his fingers through the good earth, and walking through His garden, and talking to its inhabitants, because he is aware (while they sometimes forget) that this communion with Him is absolutely essential to their quality of life (Gen 3:8-9).

Genesis also shows God delegating power to people, so that they can be helpmates to one another, and give names to things, and tend the Garden and exercise gracious dominion over its creatures (Gen 2:15). Nothing so thrills God as seeing his creation thriving and his creatures growing to the potential for which they were made (Gen 1:31a). As the second century bishop, Irenaeus, puts it: “The glory of God is a [person] fully alive.”

This is what the Bible teaches: You and I came from a brilliant Being who – like a Gardener -- loves to use his power to create and cultivate life until it is flourishing. We’re made in the Gardener’s image and likeness. We’re meant to take all the seeds and tools he’s given us in the way of personalities, skillsets, and resource pools, and use this power in our hands to help the whole creation flourish.

But this first story also tells us what went wrong. Genesis says that the root of humanity’s problems is that we bought the lie that we do not need God or to respect any boundaries in order to thrive (Gen 3:1a, 5a). Genesis depicts us losing our intimacy with God, with one another, and even with ourselves (Gen 3:9). It shows human beings beginning to use their God-given power to pursue the fleeting kind of control, significance, or comfort idols can give us. This first biblical story helps us understand how the Garden became the wilderness we live in today.

Thankfully, of course, there are still garden spots. Some of us spent Spring Break at one of them! By God’s grace we still find these little oases or fashion them for ourselves. But it would be sad if we let each other settle for a merely comfy lifestyle and the next tech toy and fifty shades of bondage or beer and think this is flourishing. Talk about mistaken identity. You and I were created as Children of Paradise! We were made to walk with God, and grow in his likeness, and use our power to help this earth and everyone in it enjoy a thriving beauty and a teeming abundance.

So, every time you see the arid poverty of those wastelands over which ISIS or AQAP now presides, let it help you remember. Every time you drive through some blighted community... or watch buildings burn or riots rage... or see the hollow eyes of a child who now lives in desperation... Every time you hear another indicator of environmental destruction... or see people in our schools, governments, or streets treating each other as enemies instead of cultivators of a common earth... Each time you confront the hard-baked ground of your own character or family... Remember the Gardener. Remember from Whom we came, for what we were created, and that it’s not meant to be this way.

The Gardener Restores

But, you know what? It’s not always going to be this way. I said earlier that there are THREE STORIES in the Bible that everybody should read. Well, the SECOND story is found in the last three chapters of the book where the Apostle John is given a Revelation of a coming future: **Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God... On each side stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit... And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is once again among people... ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”** (Rev 21-22)

meaning of crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away! The who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Rev 21-22)

The Russian philosopher, Nicholas Berdyaev, once suggested that this is why something in every human heart surges when we encounter the beauty of an emerging spring. *"All beauty in the world is either a memory of Paradise or a prophecy of the transfigured world."* One day, the Gardener will restore his creation to its original goodness and glory. All the misuse of power you and I have seen – the idolatry and infamy, the coercion and violence and injustice -- will come to an end. All the damage done by diseases and birth defects, accidents and tragedies, broken individuals and corrupted institutions will be undone. Like the ultimate springtime emerging from the longest winter, life will become a Garden again – by the power in God's hands.

It sounds so good, doesn't it? Actually, it sounds GREAT. Raise your hand if you're tired of living in a winter-bound wilderness. Raise both if you'd like to live in a garden again. But why believe that's anything more than a nice fantasy?

The Gardener Resurrects

Author Ken Davis tells of a woman who was horrified one day to gaze out her window and see her dog shaking the life out of a neighbor's pet rabbit. By the time she got outside, the bunny was dead. The woman panicked. Her relationship with this neighbor was already very rocky. So, picking up the carcass, she took it inside, washed it, blow dried and combed it till it was downright fluffy, then snuck into the neighbor's yard, and propped the bunny back up in its cage. An hour later, the house next door erupted in screams. She ran over and asked her neighbor: "What's going on?" "Our rabbit!" her neighbor cried. "He died two weeks ago. We buried him. Now he's back!"

My friend, John Ortberg, connects this story to Easter with the following comment: "People in the ancient world knew [that] dead rabbits tend to stay dead. They [also] knew [that] dead rabbits tend to stay" that way too. As renowned scholar, N.T. Wright, reminds us: "There were many messianic movements in the first century. In every case, the would-be Messiah got crucified by Rome as Jesus did... In not one single case do we hear the slightest mention of the disappointed followers claiming their hero had been raised from the dead. They knew better."

And yet here is where the THIRD of the Bible's great garden stories comes in. It's told in the last three chapters of the Gospel According to John. These are the facts. The carcass of the crucified and buried man had disappeared. Despite the fact that armed guards had been posted to stop any theft and hoax the body was gone. What is more, the graveclothes the body had been in were undisturbed. They'd been left behind like a butterfly's chrysalis. Not only was the dead rabbit not eventually found and put back in his cage, but Mary and hundreds of others swore they met Jesus more alive than life itself. They put their fingers into the nail marks in his hands. They walked and talked with him. They sat and ate with him. And the disciples were changed. Skeptics like Thomas and James became convinced believers. Cowards like Peter and Mark became people of great courage. Enemies of Jesus like Saul became apostles like Paul.

Everywhere they went, they told the story of the Great Gardener and set their hands to renewing some part of his creation until the day when he would return to restore it all. I can't stress enough that the Gospel these disciples preached and died for wasn't the message it often gets reduced to in our time. It wasn't: "Consider Jesus 'cause he was a really great guy." It wasn't: "Contemplate Jesus because he had some good teachings." It wasn't: "Hey, y'all, lets circle up in his memory and support each other." The message of Easter was simply this: "Commit your life to Christ because his resurrection proves that he has the POWER to overcome sin and death and bring forth new life."

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Some of you are saying "AMEN," because you have felt Christ's renewing touch on your life already. But maybe this is the day when some others of us will let the Gardener take hold of us truly. Maybe you want the complete forgiveness of your sins that Jesus offers. You want the assurance that you one day will rise beyond the grave. You want a power from beyond yourself to repair your character, to restore your family, to renew your joy and purpose, to make you part of the community God is using to replant the wilderness. Well here's the Good News: Springtime can begin for you now. Join me in this simple prayer and then tell one of the pastors if you did so before you leave today.

Let's bow together: "God, I know you are the Gardener that my life needs. So, this Easter and in the name of Jesus, I surrender and commit myself to the creative, restoring, resurrecting power that is in your hands. Amen."

5

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