

Easter Sunday 2019 **Imperfect Believers: An Unnatural Truth**  
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

*“Mary Magdalene turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus....supposing him to be the gardener.”* – John 20:14

Easter is always an amazing day, full of tradition, ritual and a celebration that has endured through the centuries... even millennia. We know this story so, so well we could recite it from memory. We know it like the back of our hands. It is familiar enough that nothing more needs to be said about it or could possibly be gleaned from another reading of the story in scripture. Or so we think.

But God is more amazing than we can ever know and even closer to us than we believe. The story of Easter is more wonderful than we realize. It is a story with more meaning than we know, on more levels than we can perceive at one time. Easter is not just a celebration for one morning followed by a nice lunch, but a new way of living each day and seeing the world anew.

The first person to see the risen Christ was Mary Magdalene. It happened outside the tomb, in a garden. She was imperfect in her vision, but not in her understanding.

On Good Friday Jesus' body had been placed in a tomb hewn out of stone in a garden, a site owned by Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy businessman who gave up his own gravesite for Jesus. The burial was done quickly because sunset was soon to come and the Sabbath was nearly upon them.

Mary went to visit when she was able, to pay her respects, nothing more. What else could you do with a huge stone rolled across the front of a tomb? As soon as she saw that the stone was rolled away, she knew something was up. It wasn't a resurrection she expected (that wasn't anything to ever expect), but she ran to Peter to report a theft of the body. Peter and the other disciple returned with Mary to check the evidence. What they saw –or didn't see– was evidence enough for the men to believe.

They saw linen wrappings tossed aside, with the napkin once laid on Jesus' head neatly folded - but no body.

Then they had the biggest 'aha' moment in history, put two and two together, and realized that Jesus was risen from the dead. They ran to tell the others.



But Mary lingered, overcome with emotion. Why she was weeping is made clear in her very matter of fact conversation with an angel. Mary still thought that Jesus' body was stolen. What else could possibly have happened? She needed to know where he was, simply enough, so her tears could still flow.

When someone else came up to her and asks why she's crying, she answers that she just wants to know where Jesus' body has been taken. (A sensible desire at that point.) She assumes that this person, who apparently doesn't look angelic, might have a clue as to where Jesus' body now is. Thinking that he is the gardener, a person who might have reason to be there, she asks where Jesus's body has been placed.

The description of Jesus as a gardener isn't meant to suggest that Jesus was literally gardening that morning—though he might have been, and that's interesting enough to think of. But after we hear of Jesus' graveclothes lain to the side in the tomb, you have to wonder how it was that Jesus was able to find other clothes to wear. Did you ever take a second to think about that?

Conventional artistic renderings of this scene throughout the ages usually depict the moment when Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus, who has just called her by name and she reaches out to him to touch him, which he will not allow. This portrait we have this morning precedes Mary's recognizing Jesus. And it tells an interesting story in itself. Mary is looking straight at Jesus and does not recognize him yet. What is just as certain is that Jesus is definitely wearing some unusual togs!

Since this painting is from the early 1600's we can allow for some leeway, but the artist has done us a wonderful service with this piece of work.

The artist is a person of note herself. Lavinia Fontana is claimed to have been the first professional woman portrait artist in Western history.

Living in the early 1600's in Bologna Italy, she bore 11 children, and her husband served as her agent. Her renderings are always unique, with a slightly different approach than was customary.

She portrays this brief but critically important scene in a faithful rendering of the text. Mary is not so much winsome as matronly. Jesus is not robed in splendor nor in blood-clotted rags. Having been raised to life again, he needs something to wear and finds the gardener's spare togs. Conventional artistic renderings of this scene convey the clear message that Mary was mistaken; that Jesus is *not* the gardener (and he rarely ever looks the



part.) But Jesus in fact never says this. In fact Lavinia's Jesus may well have dirt under his fingernails. His hat doesn't fit quite right and his tunic appears a little short, but he plays the part. This portrait shows that Mary is not entirely wrong about the gardener; Jesus can be both the gardener and the risen Christ, too.

There are two important takeaways from this notion of "Jesus as gardener" for us this morning, more important than you might expect. First, it is an antidote to 'stranger danger.' That is, if when he arose, Jesus appeared as a stranger to those who knew him, like the disciples and the Mary at the tomb, then perhaps we should look again to see the holiness in those who are strangers around us (who might range from someone across the table to someone across the globe). The great value of Lavinia's artistic suggestion is that she invites us to think not only of all the *places* where we have failed to see Jesus, but of all the *people* in whom we have failed to see Jesus, too.

We should be on the lookout for where we think Jesus might be but also in the most unlikely places as well; we should be on the lookout for gardeners and for anyone in whom the risen Lord might be made known. We should be on the lookout for day laborers or postal workers, for checkout clerks and waitresses, maybe even for accountants and lawyers, for all I know, and migrant workers, and for the person who last asked you for a dollar on the street corner, and for any other neighbor whose presence we are generally inattentive to, but who might, all the same,

bring us into the living presence of God, or who might bring the living presence of God to us. We are all children of God, after all.

Those who are only looking for Jesus in someone who meets their own expectations of what he should look like are bound to have very few sightings of the Lord, if any at all. But those who are on the lookout for gardeners - or for anyone who might bear the image of Christ - well, they are bound to have many encounters with the living Lord, who, after all, has constituted his Body in the world by calling many people together to know, love and serve by serving others.

The second way this notion of Jesus' as gardener strikes me is to take it more internally... to understand Jesus as a **gardener of the soul...** a gardener cultivating resurrection life in all who seek him. The gardener metaphor is fertile and faithfully depicts the process of salvation in our lives.

A gardener's work is earthy and intimate. Gardeners have their hands in the humus. (We are humans from the humus.) Gardeners handle living things with living hands. Jesus is not afraid to get his hands dirty in the humus of humanity. That Jesus is a gardener with a good heart and a green thumb can change our perspective on life. I promise you that your life is not so messed up that Jesus can't nurture you into flourishing.

In terms of our Lenten theme of "Imperfect Disciples"...when Mary Magdalene "supposed him to be the gardener," she was more right than wrong.

Jesus is the gardener of resurrection who cultivates new life in all who come to him. God is the source of all that lives and grows. Jesus helps facilitate what needs doing in life; sometimes its trimming back what is harmful or unnecessary, sometimes its stimulating new growth. Jesus is with us through thick and thin in more ways than we know.

Trust the gardener (and stay in his garden) and Jesus will grow new life out of the husk of your old life.

So take heart, if you're in the garden, the gardener is there. You may not always recognize him at first, but he is there. He calls you by name and his desire is for you to flourish. Believe in the gardener, listen and be aware of what is going on in your life...for the risen Lord is with you, now and always. Amen.

