

“The Gardener”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

John 20:1-19

April 1, 2018

Easter Sunday

New Year’s Day, 2010. We were meeting up with some friends for breakfast at a crowded diner on the North Side of Chicago. As the hostess led us to a table way in the back, my dear friend Jeanne stopped at a booth to say hi to a former coworker named Frank. Frank was there with his wife and young children and Jeanne enthusiastically wished them all a Happy New Year and went on and on about how great it was to see them. A bit bleary-eyed, the rest of our group left Jeanne to catch up with Frank and made our way to the table in search of caffeine.

When she finally joined us, Jeanne was redder than a cherry-flavored jellybean. “So who’s Frank?” I asked as I sipped piping hot coffee. “I worked with Frank at the assisted living place on the South Side,” she said. “But that wasn’t Frank. That was just some guy who looked like him. And he just kept nodding as I rambled about what a great guy he is. His wife went from confused to pretty angry. I think I got him in trouble.”

It such an easy thing to do. You’re in the grocery store, and you spot your neighbor in the freezer section and you start talking to them about their dog and only when they look nervously at their waffles do you realize you’re talking to a complete stranger. Back in the old days, before cell phones and caller ID, there’d be those people who would call you and not introduce themselves, assuming you’d know their voice, and you’d panic trying to figure out whether it was Aunt Carol or your weird next door neighbor. I wonder if you’ve ever started yelling at another driver, only to get close enough to discover it was someone you know. It’s such an easy thing to do.

“Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’” Could there be any better piece of scripture to read when Easter falls on April 1st? *Supposing him to be the gardener...*

Seventy-seven days ago we were just starting to make our way through this Gospel of John. In chapter 1, we encountered Jesus for the first time, as John the Baptist points to him and declares him to be the Lamb of God. Two of John’s disciples immediately start following Jesus, without saying a word. Jesus notices these guys and he speaks for the first time in the Gospel and his question to them is “What are you looking for?”

We have come back to that question again and again as Jesus tries to show his disciples and the people he meets and the religious leaders conspiring against him and all who hear him speak and see the signs he performs that if they are looking for a *what* they are missing the *who* in their midst. Whether they seek healing or rebellion against Rome or living water or bread from heaven or eternal life or truth or resurrection, if they do not come to understand that the answer they seek is the light of the world, the Lamb of God, the very one that John the Baptist pointed to, they will have failed to see the Way standing right before them waiting to be recognized.

Those who got it, who got that it was Jesus they were looking for — the woman at the well, the man who could see after Jesus put mud in his eyes, John the Baptist — they spend their days telling everyone they meet about

who he is and what happened to them when they met him.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’” Mary Magdalene had not come there to find a *whom*. She had come looking for a body. She had come expecting death.

When your eyes are looking for death, death is what you will see.

The pieces are there. The stone rolled away. The linen wrappings and the cloth. The angels. The gardener. But the violence and agony of Thursday-into-Friday were so fresh and so real. Death is the final word in this life. It’s what wins, at the end of the day. This is the only *what* that makes sense to the brain. You come expecting to see death, and so the stone and the linen and the visitors and the gardener all have to fit into that paradigm. Death has to be here somewhere. Where is it? Someone must have taken the body.

Whom am I looking for? I’m looking for death. Have you seen it? I left it here, just two days ago.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” And that does it. He has called her by name. He is reminding her not of her intellectual beliefs, not of her religious tradition, but of their relationship. And she responds in kind, “Rabbouni!” — teacher. She is his disciple. He offers her connection and now she sees. She sees and she runs to the rest of the disciples to preach that very first Easter sermon: “I have seen the Lord.” Mary doesn’t say “I have seen the empty tomb” or “I have seen resurrection” or “I have seen a miracle.” She bears witness to who she has seen. To his relationship to them as Lord. Mary is now very clear about who she encountered in the garden.

The old framework of death will simply not fit anymore. She has seen him, alive. And truly alive. Not zombie-alive or shimmery-ghost-alive. There’s a story in the Hebrew Scriptures in which King Saul needs some advice from the prophet Samuel who, unfortunately, is quite dead, and so Saul seeks the help of a witch in Endor and she contacts the spirit of the prophet and he is pretty annoyed at having been disturbed. This is not that. This is not a wandering soul stuck between worlds. This is not Sheol or Hades or one of the Deathly Hallows. Resurrection is not life with a sepia filter. It’s not diminished life. It is magnified life.

And so the followers of Jesus from Mary Magdalene to Mary Brooks have been taught to look for life, not death. It takes a new lens, a new worldview, a new color palette.

This new way of seeing and moving and asking questions does not deny death. It’s not naive. Quite the opposite, actually. This shift in paradigm knows well that the cross comes for us all. Our cells get old, and so we eventually die. Or they start to multiply and we try to kill them before they kill us, and we’ve come so far in that battle, but the cells still claim awful victory a whole lot of the time. The life in bacteria and viruses overcomes our life sometimes. Meaningless accidents happen. And then, just to make sure death gets its due, those who look for death inflict violence upon other humans. That last one is how we got to this tomb.

The life in Christ denies none of that. And it doesn’t promise to make suffering any easier. It does promise that the story of every soul that dies is not a story authored by death. Those who die are not defined by their death, but by their life. Following Jesus means death does its thing, but it is a *what*, not a *who*, in the end. And as we walk through valleys of death, the gardener walks with us.

Perhaps Mary supposed him to be the gardener because what Jesus has done often looks like gardening. He's got his hands dirty. He's tending to delicate life. He's providing sustenance. He's being careful. He's pruning and shaping and weeding. He's scattering seed.

They buried him, but that only led to new life.

All this new life and resurrection and hope is exciting and makes for phenomenal music. But the world feels less like a garden than a war zone right now. Even when we are not physically harming each other, we are tearing one another down and it seems bullies run the world, mocking resurrection in an endless search for new ways to inflict death on the vulnerable. Our world seems to look for the tiniest shoot emerging from the ground so that it can stomp on it. Which makes me think of a Presbyterian minister.

Hollywood is making a documentary about the most famous minister in the history of our Presbyterian Church (USA), and it comes out this summer. And there's another film in the works, with Tom Hanks in the lead role. The Reverend Mister Fred Rogers gets quoted any time a tragedy strikes. Mister Rogers said many wise things in his years of work with children — "I like you, just the way you are" and "Love isn't a state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like *struggle*" and "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood" come to mind. But the quote I'm talking about goes like this:

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers--so many caring people in this world."

Look for the helpers. I wonder if we might decide to look for the gardeners. And to seek to be gardeners. To look not for death, but for life. To inhale the sweet smell of decay and be able to envision flowers and herbs and wild vines and towering trees. To be part of love and life having the last word. To be careful with the vulnerable ones we meet and provide all they need to grow. To celebrate the incredible diversity that sprouts up before us. To breathe out justice and to breathe in hope. To look for life and know that Christ in the middle of all of the mess around us, even if we struggle to recognize his presence at times — even if sometimes all we see is a gardener.

Maybe that sounds just lovely to you. Or maybe it sounds hard. Maybe it even sounds impossible. If there is ever a time to give ourselves over to the impossible, to go all-in on the incomprehensible, it's while we're standing in the garden and the question comes to us, "Whom are you looking for?"
Amen.