

The Words for this Week

April 4, 2021

The Gospel reading for Easter comes from John's Gospel and it focuses on when Mary saw Jesus shortly after he was resurrected.

John 20:1-18

20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

20:2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

20:3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

20:4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

20:5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

20:6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

20:7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

20:8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

20:9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

20:10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

20:12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

20:13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

20:14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

20:15 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."

20:16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

20:18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary and two of the disciples had peered into the tomb and saw that Jesus was not there. While the disciples left to ponder what that meant, Mary stayed near the tomb trying to understand where Jesus went. She sees a man who she assumes is a gardener, and as we just heard, she did not realize initially that this was Christ. All of this was happening and represents one of the key events on that first Resurrection Day.

Now there is a point that I would like to revisit, one that I've raised before as an Easter message, and one that I plan to expand on (but of course within an allowable timeframe because some of us have an Easter dinner waiting on us). The point is that Mary did see a Christ as a gardener. And I say that because as a self-avowed urban gardener, I recognize those steps that Jesus took after he was resurrected, after his victory over the grave. He did what all gardeners do: he prepared the soil, he planted the seeds, he watered and and fed the seeds, making sure that there was plenty of good sunlight. And then he returned to his garden, to see what had actually taken root, what had germinated and started to grow.

You see, when Jesus gathered his disciples, promising to make these fishermen able to fish for people for the Kingdom of God, when he unlocked the mysteries of scripture to them revealing the two greatest commandments: loving God with your whole heart, and loving your neighbor just as you love yourself, when he spoke truth to power, when he healed the sick and raised the dead, when he showed love and compassion to those who were marginalized, and when he showered us with the warm sweet light of his love, those steps served as evidence of Christ as a gardener.

It shows him preparing the soil - us, planting the seed - God's word, watering and feeding with God's truth, and providing the necessary light - the light of Love - for our spiritual growth. And then, like all gardeners he returns to his garden - to where he walked and taught and preached, returning to those who he loved, back to those who he fed, he came back to see what had actually taken root. He wanted to see firsthand what had sprouted, what was growing. If there were something undesirable, you know something akin to weeds or some type of fungus, he would have removed it. But here he sees Mary, and he says her name, and she sees the one who she thought was a gardener who is actually the Risen Savior.

Christ would go on to see other followers in the coming days, and each time he sees that what he has planted has indeed taken root. He sees this group of followers growing in their faith and in their numbers. And he sees all of this within the context of people using their freewill, with folks making their own decision of whether to follow the Cross or not. He then seals the deal by appearing to his disciples and breathing the Holy Spirit into them. And it is the Spirit that continues to be with us each day; that sweet, sweet Spirit that is in this place and that is also in our hearts.

I guess the question that we should consider is what is planted in our garden? What is planted in our garden with respect to our families, our relationships within our community, and yes even within our church? You see if love is what flows in and out of our gardens, if these are places that welcomes all, if instead of having marigolds or impatiens as border flowers our gardens are encircled with compassion, then maybe our gardens are alright.

But if instead there is chaos and hatred, if folks are excluded because of any number of personal traits, if what exists within our personal gardens is nowhere close to what Christ taught, then it is safe to say that our personal gardens are in need of some major work. Where the love of Jesus was supposed to have been planted, what sprouts up is anything but Jesus.

For example, a few years ago, I called myself planting summer squash in my garden. But somehow, either because I grabbed the wrong seedlings at the nursery, or someone had mislabeled the seedlings, what sprouted and grew and wound up taking over a good portion of my backyard was acorn squash. This plant grew everywhere and we had at least 50 acorn squashes; I couldn't give them away fast enough.

And since then, I take a closer look at what I plant and as well, what is sprouting. Just because I had

something growing that I did not want or did not intend to grow, it doesn't mean that I cannot make adjustments to get it right going forward. If there is a lack of love within the church, or in the community, or in your home, it can be corrected. We don't have to live with that which we don't want, we don't have to keep the burdens of hatred and discord in our lives.

We can take a simple yet bold step by embracing love. It is a first step, one of many that we will need to take, but this initial step to embrace love, to embrace God's love, to love God with our whole heart, to love our neighbors, to love the strangers, and to love ourselves, that is the best first step. It points us in the right direction. It precludes all of the other steps and requirements, you know like having enough money, having a lot more people within the congregation, all of which would be good to have but first and foremost we need to embrace love.

The issue of whether the United Methodist Church will officially become welcoming and inclusive, opening its doors, hearts, and minds to all of God's children, has been debated and studied for decades, but it comes down to love. The issue of gun control and gun rights has been a hot button issue for decades, but love - embracing and practicing love will get us to a resolution. The same could be said about the many social issues in front of us: immigration, housing,

healthcare, racial and social justice - we can talk and talk and talk about all of these issues - and we have, but if we were to start with love then the outlook on these issues would radically change.

Jesus came into this world to show us what real love is all about. He died for our sins, and on the Third Day, which we call Easter, he rose from the grave, he left the tomb, he was resurrected and showed us that there was and is a life for all of us after this life - the life everlasting.

And he came back to see how his followers were doing, to see just how his ministry had taken root, seeing how things were moving forward, and as he was returning to be with God the Creator, he left us with God's Spirit. It is the Spirit that helps us to grow in our faith, it is the Spirit that guides us through this life, it is the Spirit that interacts with our own spirit, loving us, forgiving us, sharing our joys and our burdens.

What did Christ see as the result of his ministry? What did he see sprouting up in his garden? Love, he saw love. And for us, as those who are following the footsteps of Jesus, we are the ones who strive to carry the cross, we are the ones who need to work on our own gardens by planting and nurturing the love that is in our hearts, the same love that we say we have for

God Almighty, and willingly sharing that love with this world today. Amen.

Please stay safe and remember, *God loves you, and so do I, and there is absolutely nothing that you can do about it!* Peace and blessings, Pastor Dave