
Supposing Him To Be The Gardener?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Alleluia!

You!

You are a beautiful sight to behold! Seeing you this morning is like seeing the resurrection of Jesus!

Actually, the first person to see and behold the resurrected Jesus was Mary, Mary Magdalene. And what a sight that must have been! Imagine seeing Jesus standing right before you! Imagine what you would feel like, when you—and everybody else—knew that Jesus had died, that he had been enclosed in the grave; and then, suddenly, he was standing right before you. Imagine the heavenly light you would see, and the divine joy pumping your heart!

But No. The Gospel of John is very clear that this was not the scenario in which Jesus appeared to Mary. Mary, who was the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus, did not actually recognize Jesus.

What?

Yes, Mary looked up on that first Easter morning and saw Jesus there, but she mistakenly thought he was the gardener. She has a conversation with him, “supposing him to be the gardener” (John 20:15).

How in the world did that happen? How could she have not recognized Jesus? She had been with him for several years, very close to him. (Some have speculated too close to him!) She might have been the one to have washed his feet with her hair. Mary was as close to Jesus as anyone. How in the world did she make that mistake?





One of my favorite paintings of the resurrection is a painting by Rembrandt, which shows this very scene. There is Mary, weeping in the early dawn. And there is someone with her, but it doesn't look like the Jesus we usually see in religious paintings. When I have shown the slide of that painting to my classes, out of the blue, it is very rare that someone identifies that other person in the painting as Jesus.

They don't recognize Jesus because Rembrandt painted him wearing a large broad-brimmed hat, a sun hat! And he is clearly carrying some sort of shovel, a gardening spade. He looks like a common ordinary gardener in the painting, just as Mary Magdalene is said to have spotted him.

Yes, Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener on that first Easter, and how could she have made that mistake? She had traveled and ministered with him, maybe for three years. She had witnessed Jesus' behavior in both hard times and easy times.

She had admired Jesus tenderly picking up children just like ... well, just as tenderly as he might be coaxing a young seedling from the ground. She had listened to Jesus carefully explain some stories just like ... well, just like he might be tilling and preparing good soil. In fact, many of Jesus' stories were about the soil, and seeds, and vines and weeds and rocks.

Yes, that has to be the reason Mary saw a gardener before her! She had witnessed Jesus being a gardener throughout his ministry! Mary had seen Jesus tear into people, especially the Pharisees, just like a gardener might tear into some overgrown thicket, cutting away the old growth. Mary had seen Jesus cut into new growth, too, training and trimming the branches that were his disciples.

Mary thought Jesus was the gardener, because Jesus *is* a gardener!

I have a friend who is a delightful gardener. In one of my classes last week, I asked people to share a moment recently when something good had happened to them. My gardener friend shared her simple and wondrous surprise as she went outside to check on her garden after the winter cold, to see what was coming out of the ground. She naturally did not know which plants would make it, and which would not. But then, she began to recognize her old plants, one by one emerging in the Spring ground. She exclaimed, personally, to each one, "Oh, you made it!" "Oh, you made it!" She was delighted at each new sprout.

Her remarks reminded me of the line that Tom Key uses in his musical, *Cotton Patch Gospel*, the musical drama shaped by the New Testament translations of the Georgian, Clarence Jordan. In that musical, after the pain and suffering of crucifixion and death, suddenly there is Jesus on stage, resurrected and back to life. And he is smiling! His smile is as broad and delightful as a Spring flower. In fact, his smile is one of sheer astonishment itself. Jesus himself is surprised at his own resurrection, and the first words out of his resurrection mouth are, "Hey! It worked!" (It sounds wonderful when Tom Key says it!)

Gardeners get delighted when life blossoms forth from the ground. In the garden of life, there is no one more delighted than Jesus when life springs forth. Jesus wants to delight in us today. The gardener Jesus wants to see us grow.

Yes, Jesus is a gardener. It is Jesus who is the one tilling and turning soil in our lives. Sometimes that tilling is painful. He digs into us. He breaks up dirt clods. He turns over the earth below and exposes it to the sun. Those activities are not always comfortable for us.

But if you are having some earth turned over in your life, and if you thought it was just a hindrance, a burden, an obstacle,

maybe you are mistaken. Maybe you are mistaken like Mary was mistaken. Maybe the plowing in your life is being done by Jesus. Maybe it's the gardener Jesus plowing up new soil.

Jesus is the one who plants new seeds in our lives. And sometimes we don't recognize those seeds. The plants that emerge are unknown and strange to us, and often frightening. Again, don't be mistaken. Those new seeds might come from Jesus.

And Jesus weeds, too. He casts out weeds and pests just like he casts out demons and illnesses. That's why Mary thought he was the gardener; he had cast seven demons, seven pests, from her own life!

Jesus is also the one who cuts back dead limbs; he prunes. Hey, sometimes what is being pruned looked perfectly good to us. What is that, some kind of mistake? No, it isn't a mistake. It is Jesus. It is Jesus, pruning, grooming you for new life.

Yes, for new life. That new life confuses us just like it confused Mary on that first Easter morning. She mistakenly identified Jesus as the gardener, just like we mistakenly identify the sources of weeding and pruning and tilling and turning in our own lives. We think those travails come from somebody else, or something else.

No. The source of that tilling and pruning is Jesus. It is Jesus cultivating, and preparing you and me, for new life. Jesus is not content merely to be resurrected by *himself*. Jesus is preparing *us* for resurrection, too.

Mary, the first witness of resurrection, did not recognize Jesus at first. She remained confused until something else happened, when a holy moment occurred. That moment was when Jesus spoke her name to her. He called her by name. He said one word, "Mary."

That is when the glory occurred! When Jesus called her by name, she knew that he was the one who had cast out demons and pulled out weeds in her own life. He was the one who had loved and coaxed new seeds out of the ground of her life. He was the one who had pruned her life into shape. Jesus was the gardener, out watching the soil in the Spring, ready to call each new plant by name as soon as it poked its sprout out of the ground. Jesus knew her personally!

Jesus calls each of his new plants by name, and he delights—he delights!—when we emerge from the darkness of the earth! Jesus says, "Sam!" and "Mary" and "Billy" and "Bubba" and "Juan" and "Maria" and "Mohammed" and "Fatima" and "Chang" and "Ying." And he calls every single one of us by name.

Jesus knows us like a gardener knows us, like a holy gardener who tends to resurrection in the Spring, like a gardener who knows that seeds don't die when they slip into the ground and into the darkness of the grave.

Whoever you are, and whatever you have been going through lately, Jesus speaks your name this morning. We may look like the same old people this morning. We may look like we did last year or last season.

But we have been transformed. We have been turned and tilled. We have been weeded and pruned. We have been transformed in these past few days, when we were blinded by crucifixion pain at noon, when we slept in the darkness, and when we wept in the early dawn. When we fall into the ground, we live!

Yes, I am delighted this morning by Easter, delighted by the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus lives! But my delight pales in comparison with the Master Gardener, Jesus the Gardener, who is even more delighted with the resurrection that occurs in each of the plants in his garden.

God wants to share Easter with us today. God wants to delight in us, we who pop our heads up out of sleep and darkness and winter this early morning. "Welcome happy morning," age to age shall say, and God says it, too.

"Hey, you made it!" "Hey, it worked!"

Welcome! Christ is risen! We are risen! Alleluia!

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