

Sermon: The Risen Gardener - Text: John 20:1-18 - Easter Sunday April 21, 2019
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON, Rev. Steve Clifton

There is a story shared by some prayerful people who lived around the year 400CE - the Desert Fathers and Mothers –monastics who lived in the deserts of the Middle East. They wrote of “A young monk who was having trouble waiting for God to show up, difficulty persisting in prayer and in loving ministry when there were no tangible results to show for his efforts. His mentor took a dry wooden stick, planted it and said: water it every day until it bears fruit.”

I shared this story in a group some years ago and he told me a story in return. A few years before he made a bird house and placed it on an old long stick that he found in the forest. He planted the stick in the ground and waited for the birds to come. But to his surprise the stick sprouted branches and before long his bird house was perched, not on a barren stick but on a new living tree.

In the Easter story as it’s told in the Gospel of John, Christ rises from death in a springtime garden—and in this story of the resurrection, he is first identified as a gardener.

Each of the four Gospels’ look at the Risen Christ through a different lens. In Matthew, Christ’s resurrection is cataclysmic with an earthquake and blazing light—and Christ appears suddenly and vividly to disciples on the run and on the mountaintop.

In Luke, the risen Christ is first encountered as a teacher and finally is recognized in the breaking of bread.

Mark writes his story breathlessly, filled with mystery and wonder and confusion.

For John the Risen One first appears in a springtime Garden

And early Christian interpretations of Easter drew deeply on garden imagery picturing humanity as being caught up in a new, redemptive and unending form of springtime renewal. The early church saw itself becoming a springtime garden of the new creation cultivated by the Risen Christ:

- “You were dry, “Ambrose of Milan said in the 4th C, “and you began to flower again in the abundant waters of {Christ}.”
- Cyril of Alexandria in the same era as Ambrose wrote that springtime is “a canvas” on which “the great work of Christ” is painted.

- John's Jesus encourages his followers to think of his burial as a seed planted in the ground: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."
- As we baptize Pearl today, we welcome her into the new Creation of Easter. Early baptismal fonts were richly decorated with birds, animals, flowers, fruit-bearing trees, fish, flowing rivers, and splashing fountains, because in Jesus all Creation breaks forth with new and abundant life, like an incredible garden breaking forth with life in spring...

In Ottawa a springtime image of Easter works well this year. We have had record days of snow cover, record consecutive days of cold. Springtime is longed for...What joy comes with the spring. So the Risen Christ as a springtime gardener, bringing forth warmth and light and abundant life, it's an image that resonates deeply in us this year.

But of course Easter is not really about spring. For one thing this analogy only works in the Northern Hemisphere. In Australia and Argentina and Angola for instance, Easter is a celebration amid the onset of winter, and since Christians in the southern half of the world are celebrating Easter today, resurrection is surely not simply about the coming of spring.

And after all, spring is a regular thing. It's anticipated. Its coming is wonderful. But it is a normal, regular, expected event. The resurrection of Jesus is absolutely unexpected and astoundingly irregular.

Spring is longed for and hoped for and expected. Easter and the resurrection are so much more that we expect...

Poet W. H. Auden wrote: *Nothing possible can save us. Nothing possible can roll away the stone. Nothing possible can bring light into darkness and life into death. So something beyond the possible had to happen. That's Easter.*

Easter is so big and beyond explanation that even the gospels do not attempt to describe it. The stone is rolled away. The good news is proclaimed. But the resurrection is not described. We get no blow by blow account of the process. No explanations. Just the proclamation that Christ is risen. And then in John, after meeting the Risen Christ in the garden Mary runs to share, somehow, the enormity of this unprecedented holy event, this surprising act of a God.

The early church used garden and springtime imagery to try to capture something of the wonder of Easter. But of course Easter is a bigger than even the coming of spring after a long Ottawa winter...

But let me share with you one more Easter garden story, one that speaks to the hope we are given this day...

In the prologue to his wife's book on gardening, the author EB White, (writer of Charlotte's web among other works), describes his wife Katharine planting bulbs in the fall. Katharine is in poor health, dying in fact; he writes of her planting daffodils, tulips and hyacinths in anticipation of a bright display of color in May.

He writes:

Armed with a clipboard, Katharine would get into a shabby old Brooks raincoat much too long for her, put on a little wool hat, pull on pair of overshoes and proceed to the director's chair – a folding canvas thing – that had been placed at the edge of the garden. There she would sit, hour after hour, in wind and weather planning and directing the intricate internment...a small hunched over figure, her studied absorption in the impossible notion that there would be another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there were her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting resurrection.

It is Easter! Let us plot resurrection too... Christ is Risen. And so we have such great hope.

Thanks be to God for new life in Christ, who is risen, who lives, who is with us. Now and forever. Alleluia! Amen.