

***Return to Eden©*****Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18****April 8, 2012****Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

Don't you love a garden – the smells, the sounds of birds singing, the beauty and of the flowers with their colors and designs?

We have a lovely garden here in our sanctuary, with a stunning interpretive design on the table. If you haven't read it, I encourage you to do so. It is printed in your bulletin.

It is so appropriate to have a garden for Easter. We are told that Jesus – after his crucifixion – was buried in nearby garden. It was a quick burial. Not really a proper burial either. The Sabbath would begin with the setting of the sun and every one knows that one cannot work nor do anything on the Sabbath.

And so Jesus bloody body was wrapped in a linen cloth and placed in a tomb that we are told a man named Joseph of Arimathea owned. It was a tomb that had not been used before, which wasn't the case always. Many tombs had several ledges in it where bodies were laid.

The women – Jesus' mother, Mary and Mary Magdalene and some other women were there, along with Joseph and Nicodemus. They wrapped him up and would have done the usual procedure that was done with a loved one. They would have closed his eyes and kissed him on the cheek. And then they would have laid the linen cloth – like a napkin – over his face.

There is an interesting story about napkins and how they were used back in Jesus' day. The story says that servants were trained to set the table just so – everything in its place. And then the master of the house would be seated to eat. When the master was finished eating, he would clean his face and beard and hands and wad up the napkin, throwing it on table. This was the indication to the servant that the master was finished with his meal and that it was okay for the servant to clear his place.

If, however, the master left the napkin folded at his place and got up, it meant he was not finished and that he would be coming back to the table.

If this story is true about the Hebrew people then Jesus and all the disciples would know that ritual, wouldn't they? And if it is true, it would have been a noticeable and significant thing for Peter and the other disciple to see. We are told that the linen cloth that was wrapped around Jesus' body was lying there, but the napkin for his face was folded (or neatly rolled) and set separately to the side.

It certainly was something significant enough for John to write about in his telling of this story of resurrection, wasn't it? Could it have been a message to those who discovered

the empty tomb – a message that affirmed what Jesus told the disciples before his death?

“I will die, but I will come back!”

Could it have been a message that said, “I am not finished. I am coming back?”

It is appropriate that it happened in a garden. That Jesus gave the promise of his new life right there in that same place where there had been such grief.

If you have lost a loved one, you know the pain that goes along with that loss. And it is not too difficult to understand Mary’s being compelled to go to the garden – even while it was still dark - to go to that place where she last saw Jesus, whom she loved so much.

It seems to me that it was a brave thing for Mary to do, considering there were Roman guards stationed there. And to go in the dark before the early light shows us what courage and determination she had!

We’ve talked off and on throughout the season of Lent about the courage it takes to walk through the wilderness, to face the wild things in our spirits – in our lives – and especially to truly look head on at the events of Holy Week with Jesus arrest and torture and crucifixion and to consider just what that has to do with you and me.

It is brave for us to go to that place spiritually. We don’t like to do it. We don’t really want to face our weakness, our fickle selves – those things we allow to distract us from being fully present with our God.

But here was Mary – the woman from Magdala – whom we are told was healed of demons by Jesus and who followed him as if she were a disciple, who loved him and was his friend, who supported him and who was brave enough to be there when he died – when most of the men fled in fear.

Can you imagine what she felt and heard that morning? How did she find her way? Was it by the light of the moon or the stars? John said it was dark but could there have been those early morning shadows?

And wouldn’t there have been some birds beginning to wake and sing? And would she have smelled the smells of fragrant flowers? Would there have been lilies or tulips or hyacinths? I’m not sure what flowers would have been in that garden, but we know a garden has activity – there is growing going on, and singing.

And can’t you imagine how she must have trembled, her heart racing with fear and anxiety about meeting up with a Roman or a robber. And what did she think she would do when she arrived? We know the stone would have been massive and rolled into a

groove. It would have been impossible for Mary to roll it back by herself. Was she so beside herself with grief that she did not even consider that fact? Was she going to anoint him, or just to stand at the tomb and weep as we do at our loved ones graves?

But then, to come to the tomb and to find the stone rolled away and the hole of the tomb where Jesus was laid gaping at her – it must have gripped her heart with such fear that she turned and ran as fast as she could, stumbling in the darkness, wildly trampling through the flower beds and the bushes to get back to where the disciples were hiding.

Quickly, she told Peter and the other disciple what she had seen and they took off running to get to the tomb and see for themselves. And that is where Peter ran in first and then the other and they saw with their own eyes that Jesus' body was gone and that all that was left was the cloth – the one that had been wrapped around his body and the one that was folded up. And all we know from that discovery is that those two men saw and then went back to where they were staying.

But Mary didn't leave. Brave Mary stayed in the garden. She finally entered into the tomb herself – all alone. And there she saw 2 angels, who asked her why she was weeping. And she explained that they had now not only killed Jesus, but had taken away his body too.

And before they could even reply, she turned and saw a man whom she thought was the gardener. It was Jesus, of course. Oh, he was a gardener, all right. Not the gardener of that one small garden, but the gardener of the world – the one who oversees all the new growth, all the planting and pruning and weeding that has to happen in a garden.

Of course, Mary is overjoyed when she hears him say her name and realizes it is Jesus. She calls him "Rabbouni," which is Hebrew for "Teacher." Barbara Brown Taylor says in her Easter sermon that Rabbouni was his Friday name and here it was Sunday – an entirely new day in an entirely new life. He was not on his way back to her and the others. He was on his way to God, and he was taking the whole world with him."

Taylor writes that resurrection, unlike springtime, is unnatural, and so is the truth that it reveals this "happy morning," the new life within us, planted by God, new life that "cannot be killed, and if we can remember that – then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, and change the world.

The only thing we cannot do is hold on to him....all in all we would rather keep him with us where we are than let him take us where he is going....let him take us into the white hot presence of God, who is not behind us but ahead of us, every step of the way" (*Home by Another Way*).

And Mary ran joyfully back to tell the good news to Jesus' disciples: "I have seen the Lord! He is alive!"

As we see this beautiful garden in our sanctuary, we remember the garden where Mary first saw Jesus alive again – the resurrected Lord. I can't help but also think of what Jesus said to the thief on the cross as he was dying: "On this day, you will be with me in Paradise."

Paradise also refers back to a garden – the king's garden in Persia. It is a beautiful, lush place where the king's guests enjoyed beauty and luxury.

And think about the other place where you have heard of paradise. Was it in reference to the Garden of Eden? Those first two humans were given life in Paradise – a beautiful, luxurious, lush place where they enjoyed all the good things God, the Creator had given them – that is until they were banished out of the Paradise because of their disobedience.

Yet now, with the resurrection of Jesus, reconciliation has taken place, the garden – Paradise – is reopened. We are given new life, transformation, relationship – as if we have returned to Eden. John starts his gospel with the words "In the beginning" and he talks about the Light of the world and about darkness and how the darkness could not overcome the Light.

Here we are going back to the beginning – back to the roots of our faith. We are going back to creation itself where the Light of the world – Jesus – was from the start. And it is through him that we find shalom – healing and restoration and forgiveness and welcome back to the garden – back to the beginning.

Going back a moment to the folded napkin:

A famous Rabbi once said, "He who thinks he has finished is finished." The resurrection was not a concluding event which Mary Magdalene (and each of us) can look back on; it was a new beginning of victory over death, of transcendent love, the gift and reception of the Holy Spirit to the community of faith, of the first fruits of exalted glory pointing ahead to a future kingdom (1 Cor 15:19-26).

Friends, believe the Good News: Things are far from being finished.

We are being made new every day. We are being healed and forgiven and brought back into relationship with God who loves us. We are offered the hope and promise of life eternal, that death cannot have the final word. We are loved. We are his. It is not finished!