

## **Back to the Garden?**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

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### **John 20:1-18**

On the first day of the week, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, and saw the stone removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him!"

So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, as well as the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple went in, too, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. (They still didn't understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

But Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she cried, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She said, "They've taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they've put him." As she said this she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she didn't realize it was Jesus. Jesus said, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I'll get him."

Jesus said, "Mary!" She turned around then and said, "Rabbuni!" (which means "Teacher" in Hebrew.) Jesus said, "Stop holding on to me; I haven't ascended to the Father yet. But go, tell my brothers this: 'I'm ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" So Mary Magdalene told the disciples, "I've seen the Lord," and that he'd said these things to her.

### **Children's Story**

Did you ever see a squirrel riding a bicycle? It's not easy with those short back legs. But Sammy can do it. As a matter of fact, Sammy the Squirrel likes riding his bike better than doing just about anything else.

That's why Sammy was so upset a few weeks ago when a tree fell over onto his bike. What a mess the bike was after that! The frame was bent, the handlebars were twisted, and the wheels were anything but round.

Sammy cried. But his father told him, "Don't worry, Sam. Your bike will get fixed." Sammy didn't see how anyone could fix such a messed-up bike. But he trusted his father. And when the bike disappeared one day, he hoped it would be back soon, straightened out and ready to ride.

Well, a few days later, early in the morning, Sammy's bike was back! It wasn't perfect, not yet. The frame still had a twist to it. One side of the handlebars was still higher than the other. And the wheels still weren't quite circular. But the bike wasn't totally messed up any more. Best of all, it was his bike that he had back. And even though it wasn't perfect yet, at least he could ride it.

He could ride it, and he could work on it, too. And that's what Sammy did. Little by little, he straightened the frame and the handlebars and adjusted the spokes to make the wheels more round. He kept at it, too, because some day, he knew, his bike would be perfect.

### **Sermon**

"Christ is risen!" For two thousand years, the church's Easter refrain has not changed. "Christ is risen!" Two thousand years on, what more is there to say? "Christ is risen!" Doesn't that say it all? "Christ is risen!" Add an "Alleluia!" and we're done.

Well, not quite. There is more that can be said, more that must be said. It's not enough to say the words "Christ is risen!" We have to make some effort to unpack their meaning, to come to grips with the significance of those words. Actually, though, it's not about the words so much, the words "Christ is risen!" No, it's about the event. It's about the Resurrection. What it isn't. What it is. What it means. Christ has been raised. That's the event. That is the Resurrection.

**Here's what the Resurrection isn't.** I've said it year after year, and I'll keep saying it. The Resurrection is not "a dead person come back to life." Yes, Jesus was dead, as dead as a person gets. As I put it last week, there was no breath filling Jesus' lungs, no blood flowing through Jesus' veins, no light shining in Jesus' eyes. Jesus was dead on Friday. He was still dead on Saturday. But on Sunday, Jesus was alive, alive again. Yet that is not the Resurrection. If that were the Resurrection, "a dead person come back to life," then Lazarus would have a better claim. He was dead longer than Jesus. He came out of his tomb on the fourth day. But no one celebrates the "Resurrection of Lazarus." Because the Resurrection is not "a dead person come back to life."

Nor is the Resurrection "a dead person coming back to life and living forever." As far as we know, Lazarus died a second time. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus' adversaries plotted to kill Lazarus, to kill him after he had already died once. We have no record of that plot being carried out, but we have no reason to doubt that Lazarus did die again. Jesus, on the other hand, came back to life never to die again. That's a very important point about the resurrected Jesus. That he was alive forever. That his life cannot be snuffed out. Never again will the light leave his eyes. But that is not what the Resurrection is, "a dead person coming back to life and living forever."

The Resurrection is something else. It involves coming back to life. It involves living forever. But that's not the half of it.

**Here's what the Resurrection is.** The Resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. Say it a thousand times: "The Resurrection is the beginning of the new creation!" Say it again and again. Because the point of Easter, the "reason for the season," is not just that Jesus is alive again, not just that he is alive and will live forever, but that he is alive as the first installment of the new creation.

I've been fond of saying, "Easter means that death doesn't have the last word." That's true, but it's terribly incomplete. Think about life in this creation. Death is not the only problem. Children live in fear. Deregulated investment bankers rape retirees. Mothers weep over their sons. Churches cover up their perversions. Old men wither from loneliness. Cities shake and crumble. Easter, however, means that the old creation, with all its brokenness, sorrow, and evil — Easter means that the old creation doesn't have the last word.

When God first created, a burst of light put chaos and disorder back on their heels. At Easter, light and life burst into the brokenness and dark disorder of the first creation, planting the conqueror's flag on the territory that will be his everlasting domain, planting, as it were, a garden among the weeds. Again, the Resurrection is the beginning of the new creation.

Now, is this some hopeful, but misguided spin on the old, old story? Not at all. Consider the evidence:

- Where was the first man placed in the first creation? In a garden.
- And what was his occupation in the first creation? He was a gardener, placed in the garden to tend it and keep it (Genesis 2:15).
- Where did the resurrected Jesus take his first steps? In a garden.
- And who was he assumed to be by Mary Magdalene? The gardener.

Mary, of course, was mistaken. Or was she? Not at all. Jesus is the new Adam, the first person in the new creation. He is charged with unfolding its life. He is the gardener. Also, it's no accident that Jesus was raised on the first day of the week. The first day is when creation, in this case new creation, begins. That's what the Resurrection is. It's the beginning of the new creation.

**So, if that's what Resurrection is, what does it mean?** To begin with, it means that God builds his new creation in the midst of the first creation and using the materials of the first creation. It starts, of course,

with Jesus. Jesus took his flesh from Mary. And it's that flesh that was raised. Raised in the midst of this first creation. Raised, though transformed.

Some biblical imagery depicts the destruction of the old creation. That imagery carries important messages for us. But the actual work of new creation bears the marks of renewal and renovation, not destruction. Again, Jesus was raised in the same flesh that he received from Mary, albeit renovated. He was put to death, but he was not destroyed.

Other signs of the new creation confirm this. Think of Jesus' work to heal the sick, to give sight to the blind, to get the lame walking. Those are signs of the kingdom of God, which is the life and blessing and peace of God taking root in this world, like a garden among the weeds, which is the new creation, foretastes of it at least, in the midst of the first creation.

Think of the transformed humanity that Jesus is gathering. People forgiven by the grace of God and forgiving one another. People welcoming the light of what's coming into the darkness of what's here. People receiving the Holy Spirit, the creating power of God, through whom we become, at last, "living beings" (Genesis 2:7), "born all over again" (John 3:3) to begin already now living a new life (see Heidelberg Catechism, QA 45).

And so the Resurrection means the life of the risen Christ in us, his brothers and sisters. Living that new life, we seek to reshape the world toward what's coming: to plant and to build, to sow and to reap, to renew and to repair. So that children no longer suffer and die. So that old people may live out their years with dignity. And so that people who work hard will be able to make a life for themselves and their loved ones. It's an old vision, a prophet's vision (see Isaiah 65:20-23). It's a vision that has been renewed for us by Jesus. It's a vision we are empowered to work for by the Holy Spirit. You see, the Resurrection means a new world. With faith in the resurrected One, we make that new world our goal.

When we gather with the other congregations in the BREAD organization, we often hear from the Old Testament prophets, and with good reason. The prophetic vision of justice still rings true today, across long ages. But our motivation in BREAD is more than that. With our Jewish friends, we share an awareness of the prophets, and we share a yearning for justice. But our chief motivation is the Resurrection. That's why we'll be at Vets Memorial Auditorium on May 3, because of the Resurrection.

Christ is risen. The new creation has begun. And God joins us to Christ by faith, through the Holy Spirit, joins us in such a way that we give ourselves to the long task of imparting to life here now the shape of things to come. And so we are committed to the work of justice, among many other good things, because God's new creation is a world of justice. That's the world now begun through the Resurrection of Jesus. That's the world whose birth we celebrate today. That's the world whose full presence we work for and pray for every day of our lives.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!