Returning to the Garden of Eden
By
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John 20:1-18

1 On Sunday morning while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. 2 She ran to Simon Peter and to Jesus’ favorite disciple and said, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb! We don’t know where they have put him.” 3 Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 They ran side by side, until the other disciple ran faster than Peter and got there first. 5 He bent over and saw the strips of linen cloth lying inside the tomb, but he did not go in. 6 When Simon Peter got there, he went into the tomb and saw the strips of cloth. 7 He also saw the piece of cloth that had been used to cover Jesus’ face. It was rolled up and in a place by itself. 8 The disciple who got there first then went into the tomb, and when he saw it, he believed. 9 At that time Peter and the other disciple did not know that the Scriptures said Jesus would rise to life. 10 So the two of them went back to the other disciples.

11 Mary Magdalene stood crying outside the tomb. She was still weeping, when she stooped down 12 and saw two angels inside. They were dressed in white and were sitting where Jesus’ body had been. One was at the head and the other was at the foot. 13 The angels asked Mary, “Why are you crying?” She answered, “They have taken away my Lord’s body! I don’t know
where they have put him.” 14 As soon as Mary said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. But she did not know who he was. 15 Jesus asked her, “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” She thought he was the gardener and said, “Sir, if you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him.” 16 Then Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him, “Rabboni.” The Aramaic word “Rabboni” means “Teacher.” 17 Jesus told her, “Don’t hold on to me! I have not yet gone to the Father. But tell my disciples that I am going to the one who is my Father and my God, as well as your Father and your God.” 18 Mary Magdalene then went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord. She also told them what he had said to her. (John 20:1-18, CEV)

I have been preaching on this passage for the best part of 30 years now and have done with it everything I could think to do. I had reached a place where I thought I had mined it for all it was worth, but then something stood out; something that’s been there all the time but I have never seen. This time I stumbled across a word in verse 15, the word “gardener.” In verse 15 Mary Magdalene confused Jesus with the “gardener.” Gardener? Where did that come from? So far in the story there has been no mention of a gardener or a garden. So far all we’ve dealt with was the tomb, the burial of Jesus, the empty tomb. Where did the gardener come from? Before we dismiss this question as completely irrelevant I do need to say that every part of this story is absolutely intentional and important. By introducing the idea of a garden and the gardener perhaps John is trying to tell us something important. Garden?
We all know about the garden. The Garden is a feature of the 2nd Creation Story (actually written much earlier) found in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Genesis. The Garden was the place of complete safety and pleasure for Adam and Eve until the serpent talked them into eating the fruit of the tree of the “knowledge of good and evil.” It needs to be noted that this story is not about original sin – or any sin at all. This story is about growing up and losing innocence. It’s about Adam and Eve growing up and knowing right from wrong and making their own decisions. It’s about leaving home. Don’t miss the last verses of the 3rd chapter, “22 The Lord said, “These people now know the difference between right and wrong, just as we do. But they must not be allowed to eat fruit from the tree that lets them live forever.” 23 So the Lord God sent them out of the Garden of Eden, where they would have to work the ground from which the man had been made.” (Genesis 3:22, 23, CEV) The Garden was paradise because it was the place of innocence where humanity lived in obedience to God and in perfect relationship with one another.

But don’t miss the last verse of the chapter, “24 Then God put winged creatures at the entrance to the garden and a flaming, flashing sword to guard the way to the life-giving tree. (Genesis 3:24, CEV) After driving Adam and Eve out of the Garden, God put armed guards at the gate to keep them from coming back. There is no going back to the age of innocence. Once we’ve started making our own decisions there is no going back to the time before we knew right from wrong. There is no going back to the Garden; but that doesn’t stop us from wishing. We all dream of a life where everything is just the way it ought to be.
We all dream of a life of safety, love and relationship. We’d go back to the Garden if we could.

That leaves us wondering; by using the word “gardener” is John trying to make us think about the Garden of Eden? Is he trying to somehow link the two together?

And then I read this story by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker in their book Saving Paradise,¹ I was reminded of the story they told about exploring the church of St. Giovanni in Laterno, Italy which was built sometime in the 4th century. “We walked quietly down the right aisle, tiptoed up the transept stairs, ignored the velvet rope blocking further progress, and sneaked behind the altar. When we spotted the apse, we gasped in wonder. At the top of its curve, a bust of Jesus gazed down, serious and dignified. His golden nimbus outlined his countenance against a dark blue background strewn with white, red, and blue clouds.” p XIII. What they found – behind a huge image of Jesus on the cross was an incredibly beautiful painting of Jesus standing in the Garden of Eden.

It turns out that from the first half of the 1st Christian century we have numerous paintings and sculptures linking Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, with the Garden of Eden. The early Christian belief was that the resurrected Jesus had taken us back to the Garden; back to the time of innocence and relationship. What a beautiful idea! But, really? The

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock, Rebecca Ann Parker, Saving Paradise; How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire, Beacon Books, Boston, 2008.
Resurrection is a great story with many meanings, but back to the Garden?

What Garden? The place I live is pretty wonderful but it’s not the Garden of Eden and I do not live my life in a state of innocence. The world I live in is full of beauty, brokenness and suffering. I make my own decisions. This is not the Garden of Eden. This is not Paradise.

But then Brock and Parker begin quoting the ancient church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus (born in 130 A.D.), who exhorted those who might be misled by unsound, heretical idea to “flee to the Church, and be brought up in her bosom, and be nourished with the Lord’s scriptures. For the Church has been planted as a paradisus in this world.” Really. And then there is Origen (early 3rd century) who taught “that the church was the paradisus cum fructus pomorum (the garden with abundant fruit) described in the Song of Songs and the place of miraculous waters in the desert.”

In other words, the early church linked together the Garden of Eden, the Resurrection, and the Church. Really? The Church is Paradise? The Church is the reincarnation of the Garden of Eden? Really? I say that because I know the church with all its warts and wrinkles. I know the church can bite the hand that feeds it and shoot its own wounded. I know that depending on the day, the Church can be the greatest friend to the Kingdom of God or the greatest enemy. I know how easily we can lose our sense of direction and sink into pettiness and power struggles. I know that in these times being part of the Church can make you an outcast. Really? Paradise? The Church is Paradise?

Don’t get me started. I am afraid the church I know is a long way from being paradise. And then I got this note from Raiza (Cintron)

\[2 \text{ Ibid, p 89.}\]

\[3 \text{ Op. Cit., p.90.}\]
Spratt (which she wrote on her iphone and which I have permission to share with you). We were setting the date for Will and Lilly’s Baby Dedication when at the bottom of the e-mail she wrote this,

“I do like the idea of praying that they (Will and Lilly) grow (to be) healthy, loved, well-adjusted members of society, with knowledge of God, surrounded by a church community. To me church has been my "escape," my place to recenter myself during hard times, and it has been a very important part of me during my early development and even now, between outreach activities like meals on wheels and habitat, church camp, special appreciation for choir and music, church potlucks, Christmas dramas, intergenerational relationships, bible studies, public speaking....all the things I have learned and done at church...I want my kids to have that and to have the tools to deal with life's hardships, keeping hope and finding the strength to pick themselves up and try again. I see so many young kids now a days shooting others, harming others and I think part of it is the lack of hope or lack of having a community to help them through difficult times.”

I will always remember the morning I looked down from the pulpit at the front row of the sanctuary; where thedeacons were sitting, and there was Roy Snodgrass sitting next to Al Martinez. Between the family’s oil, land and cattle Roy had to be one of the richest men in Texas. The fellowship hall at Brite Divinity School was named in honor or his parents. Al Martinez was an Hispanic grave-digger. In terms of race and economic status these two men couldn’t be more different but yet they were sitting side by side in the service of God. No one made a big deal about it, but things like that don’t happen everywhere. I think it was extraordinary. I think it was a sign of paradise.
We’ve just finished an exceptional project in which 5 clergy from 5 denominations preached in each other’s pulpits. It turns out that the days of competition and criticism are over and we are all far more alike than we are different. It turns out that we clergy are now allowed to officiate at the Lord’s Table in each other’s churches. The ecumenical movement of the 60s, 70s and 80’s failed; we American Protestants could not agree enough to form one church – but maybe it did succeed in the sense of our being able to see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Is that a sign of paradise?

I don’t know. Maybe I’ve been a part of the church so long that I don’t see the miracles. Maybe I’ve been a leader in the church so long that I see all the problems and none of the grace. Maybe I’ve been in the church so long that I no longer see it as paradise. But it is paradise. The church is the “first fruits” of life eternal. The Church is a miracle. The church is the hors ‘oeuvres for the full paradise in heaven, in the fully realized reign of God. What we have in the church is God’s Easter gift to us.

Our area is filled with people who are proud to say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” That is they like God and maybe Jesus too but have figured out how to get by without the church. And I get their point. At times the church is not at its best. Sometimes we fail to make Christ real to the world, but sometimes we do get it right. Sometimes we welcome. Sometimes we make the tough times of life just a little easier. Sometimes we are a people of love and grace – and that is incredibly beautiful. That at least makes up for some of the other times. In those times the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ is in our midst.

Because of the resurrection of Jesus the Holy Spirit has worked in our lives to bring us together – to be a community; to be part of the larger church; to be a place where people can find faith and grow in
faith. Because of the resurrection of Jesus we have been returned to the garden – where we can meet Jesus, even if we don’t recognize him. Because of the resurrection what we share together is the place of obedience and relationship, a return to the Garden of Eden. We live in Paradise because of what happened on Easter morning. Praise be to God. And God help us. God help us to make the church more and more a place of paradise for all people.