

The Lamb, the Gardener, and Us
by Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D.

Pass-A-Grill Beach Community Church

March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday (8:30 & 10:00 am Services)

Scripture: John 20:1-18 (The Message)

I. The Easter Egg

Do you find it as interesting as I do that when Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning in John's Gospel, he takes the form of a *gardener*? You would think that Jesus might appear as, well, Jesus! Did Jesus confuse Easter with Halloween?

Curiously, this isn't the only gospel account where the risen Christ appears to someone in some other form than Jesus at first. In Luke's Easter story, Christ appears as a random traveler to a pair of followers who are walking back to their village in Emmaus seven miles outside Jerusalem. (Luke 24:13-34) He only reveals his true identity when the couple invite him over for dinner after spending the afternoon walking and talking with him. At the Sunrise Service this morning, we explored Luke's account and the significance of Christ appearing as a traveler. Now, we'll explore John's account, and why Christ appears at first as a gardener.

As one might expect concerning anything having to do with Jesus, what he does is always intentional, never random. What is a bit unexpected is that, in John's account, Jesus seems to be having a bit of fun with Mary, appearing in one form, then revealing the surprise. Who could blame him if he is, really? I mean, if you had spent your last hours in earthly form having been beaten and hung on a cross, then found yourself resurrected in a pain-free, spiritual body, with immense new awareness and power, such that you could transform into any form you like, wouldn't you be a little giddy? Might you have a little fun in this new body, to heighten the surprise of someone you love dearly?

Well, whether Jesus was having a little fun with Mary or not, he seems to be having a little fun with us. By showing up as a gardener, Jesus has hidden an Easter Egg in his own Easter story. Trust me, there's a big surprise inside this Easter Egg. He's inviting us to figure out how to open it. Most people miss the invitation. They read the story, thinking, "That's weird," and move on to what they consider the "more important" story of Jesus's appearance to Jesus's male disciples. Yet, on this Easter morning, I suggest we take Jesus up on his invitation. Would you like to open this Easter Egg?

Jesus offers us the first significant clue to why he appears as a gardener when he asks Mary what may very well be the stupidest question in all of Scripture. "Who are you looking for?" Who did Jesus *think* Mary was looking for, the Easter Bunny?

Jesus knows exactly whom Mary seeks, yet asks this question for a reason. It's a clue as to why he appears as a gardener. Jesus has actually asked this exact same question before. This question is, in fact, the very first utterance from Jesus in John's Gospel. Does it seem coincidental that the very first words he speaks in the whole gospel are exactly the same as the first words after he is resurrected on Easter morning?

The significance of this question at the beginning of John's Gospel helps us understand its significance at the end. In the beginning, John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching him and declares, "Here is the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" The next day, as John stands with two of his disciples, he spots Jesus again, and again identifies Jesus as "*the lamb of God!*"

Two of John's disciples – one of whom is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother – decide to follow after this "Lamb of God," who turns around and asks, "Who are you looking for?" The same question he asked Mary in the garden.

In response, John's disciples exclaim in excitement, "Rabbi!" which in Hebrew means "My master!"

Funny, John's disciples respond with the very same words Mary uses when Jesus's true identity is revealed. She cries out, "Rabbouni!" which in Aramaic means, "My master!"

Mystery solved! Jesus the Gardener is also the Lamb of God! Can we open the Easter Egg now and claim our prize?

Hmmm. Apparently, this egg is tougher to crack. One mystery has led to a deeper mystery. What does Jesus, the Lamb of God tell us about Jesus the Gardener?

Do you remember the Jewish Passover story? Over a thousand years before Christ, the Hebrew people were enslaved to the Egyptians. Through the prophet Moses, God warned the Egyptians nine times to free God's people – each warning being accompanied by an increasingly dramatic miracle to get Pharaoh's attention. Having ignored each one, Pharaoh was sent a final message that did finally get his attention. God's Spirit is said to have swept through Egypt killing the firstborn children of the Egyptians, just as Pharaoh had killed the firstborn among the Hebrews.

Whether or not the story actually happened this way is a matter of debate. What matters is that this story, whether historical or metaphorical, is central to Jewish identity. It has been celebrated every year for over 3,000 years by the Jewish people in their Passover Seder celebrations. According to the story, the night before the terrible event, God commanded Moses to have the Hebrews slaughter a lamb and apply some of its blood to the doorposts and lintels of their homes. Homes marked by blood of the lamb would be "passed over" and the children kept safe from harm. This is why, at a Jewish Passover Seder (a liturgical meal), either lamb, or a symbolic lamb shank, is always present.

In Jesus's day, the Passover celebration took place during Holy Week. So many lambs were brought to the Temple for slaughter by the priests in that era, that if you go to the Temple Mount even today, you can see drainage holes throughout the complex to accommodate all the blood resulting from the sacrifice. Incidentally, most of the lambs for the Jerusalem Passover celebration were specially raised for this purpose in Bethlehem – the very place our tradition identifies with Jesus's birth.

Jesus's Last Supper, which we commemorate on Maundy Thursday, was a Passover Seder. Only, in place of a Bethlehem lamb, Jesus took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body, broken for you." Similarly, Jesus raised a Passover wine cup announcing, "This is the blood of the New Covenant which is shed for you." In this act, Jesus is replacing the lamb with himself. He is becoming "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" just as John the Baptist predicted. Only, the disciples would not grasp the significance of what Jesus was doing until Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

On Good Friday, the blood of the Lamb of God was shed. Only, it was shed not to protect innocent Hebrew slaves from God's wrath against the guilty Egyptians. It was shed to protect Jesus's own crucifiers!

Eventually, the message became clear to the disciples. Jesus was signaling, in the strongest way a Jewish person could, that those who crucified him would not be the recipients of God's wrath, but God's grace. As if to remove all doubt of Jesus's intention, Jesus prayed on the Cross, "Father, *forgive them*, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)

Early Christians realized quite quickly that Jesus's act, and prayer, was not merely done for the sake of the Roman soldiers, political leaders, and religious leaders who crucified Jesus, but for all of us. After all, if those who committed the worst sin ever committed by a human being – crucifying God's chosen Messiah – received God's grace in place of God's wrath, then who wasn't saved in this act? Truly, this Lamb of God's intention was to take away the sin of *the world.*"

The implications of all this were clear to the apostle Paul, who writes:

Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins in Scripture ... none of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us. (Romans 8:35-39 The Message)

He embraced us by removing the stain of sin that has blocked us from full relationship with God since the Garden of Eden.

This understanding is one reason why most Christians who lived during the first three centuries believed in Universal Salvation. They believed that what Jesus did on the Cross was for everyone, not just believers. After all, the Roman and Jewish authorities certainly weren't believers when they received God's grace. They beat and openly mocked him.

It was only after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire that the idea of salvation being limited to Christians alone was considered orthodox. Still, there has been a significant contingent of Christians who have continuously believed in Universal Salvation for the last two thousand years, particularly among the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, the Celtic Christian community, and in our day among Congregationalist Christians, which includes the United Church of Christ. Not everyone in

these communities believe in Universal Salvation, but most have a more expansive understanding of salvation

So now, what does Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” have to do with Jesus, the Gardener of God? Before turning to this connection, I invite you to first connect the story of the Lamb of God to your own life story. Whether you believe in Universal Salvation or not, have you ever accepted the extraordinary and life-changing gift of grace that God has offered you in Christ? Why not take a few minutes to consider how your life might change, and how you might treat others, if you really trusted that Christ’s prayer and act of extraordinary forgiveness was not just for Christ’s crucifiers, but for you and all people?

II. Opening the Egg

At last, the Easter Egg is ready to be opened. Aside from Jesus, who is Scripture’s most famous gardener?

“And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there God put the man (Hebrew: adam) whom God had formed ... to till it and keep it.” (Genesis 2:8,15)

Yes, it’s Adam - the original gardener; the gardener who was kicked out of the Garden of Eden because he and his wife ate the forbidden fruit. According to the old story, by eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the original couple deprived all of us from eating the Tree of Life.

Just as with the story of Passover, whether you believe this story is historical or metaphorical, it is meant to tell us something extremely important about our identity and relationship with God. The story tells us that something is broken. Something about us and our relationship with each other, with the earth, and with God is not as it was originally intended. Really, when you look around at our world, this may be the only objectively verifiable part of our entire faith! Something’s broken here!

When Jesus appears to Mary as a gardener, any Jewish follower of Jesus would have recognized the echo. The first one raised from the dead is echoing the first one raised from the soil. Only, Jesus is not appearing as the first Adam – Adam 1.0 – but as the second, Adam 2.0. Once again, the implications of all this were quite clear not only to the author of John’s Gospel, but to the early church. Paul, who writes:

*For if the many died through the one man’s trespass [First Adam], much more surely have the **grace** of God and the free gift in the **grace** of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many [Second Adam] ... just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all [First Adam], so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all [Second Adam]. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners [First Adam], so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. [Second Adam]” (Romans 5:15, 18-19)*

The earliest Christians believed that Christ, as Second Adam, had come not just to free the Jewish people from spiritual bondage, but all of humanity. If the first Adam set humanity on the course of Destruction, the Second Adam set us on the path of Redemption. This, incidentally, is central to Paul’s theology. It’s why Paul never mentions the word “hell” once in any of his

writings in the New Testament. Of what relevance is hell if the Second Adam has broken its gates for good?

Do you see what's happening here? Whether you speak of Christ as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," or as the "Second Adam," the message is the same. Both metaphors are simply the early Church's way of proclaiming something that is ultimately too wonderful to be expressed in human words. The message of Easter. When Christ was raised, the barrier of sin standing between us and God was smashed. The gate to the original Garden has been opened. We pass through the gate by accepting God's love and grace for ourselves, and extending it to others. In so doing, we experience our first taste of the fruit of the Tree of Life. The Tree of *Eternal Love*.

Whew! A lot can happen over the course of a week – if it's Holy Week! Now, that we've opened the Easter Egg, it's time to claim the prize inside.

If Christ is the Second Adam, you may wonder, is there a Second Eve?

Indeed, there is. She is us!

Inside the Easter Egg is a wedding ring. Your wedding ring!

Why do you suppose Jesus told so many parables about a Bridegroom awaiting his Bride? Why did Jesus speak of a great wedding feast where the good and the bad alike were invited, and the only one who is excluded from the celebration is the one who refuses to dawn a wedding gown? The earliest Christians taught that the Church is the Bride of Christ. Do you think they conceived of the Church as a building?! The Church is anyone who accepts the invitation – the relationship. Anyone who accepts the fullness of Grace that God has freely given, and gives this same Grace to others, including their enemies.

Most of us have a long way to go before we assume our fullest identity as Second Eve. But that's okay. Rumor has it that, when wedded to Christ, we're wedded forever. We have eternity to grow in our relationship and into our destiny.

Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed.

Happy Easter.