

Easter Sunrise (17Apr22) John 20:1-18

This service is especially satisfying to me for its parallels to John's Gospel reading.

I'm not saying we're trying to recreate the original Easter or are playacting. This just feels a little closer to it all. Isn't there something that draws us in by following the footsteps and knowing the setting and seeing ourselves somewhat in the scene? I suppose it's why crime detectives use dioramas or some folks like historical reenactments: the feel of being there.

More to the present point, it's sort of what the Stations of the Cross were offering on Good Friday, in the colored posters or the journey around the prayer path: it's an in-place pilgrimage. We don't have to journey to the Old City of Jerusalem and the smooth limestone streets of the Via Dolorosa and be wondering if they were the same stones and streets Jesus stumbled across with a cross. We can do it here and approximate the experience, finding ourselves feeling the footsteps of Jesus, walking a ways in his sandals, maybe.

And then this morning, with a number of pleasant overlaps. Again, I wouldn't say they make the story truer or resurrection realer, but I appreciate them nevertheless. Maybe that's why you rose early to come here, too. After all, the Gospel reading began, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark." On this first day of the week (which is the mini-pilgrimage reason we gather not just today but any week on Sunday mornings), this morning you may have been out of bed or even out the door before light had dawned very much, or maybe you observe that the full brightness of the day is yet to come.

The reading went on to say that Mary came to the tomb, and though in this version it says she initially arrived alone, we're given the benefit somehow of accompanying her. Here with a tomb with no stone in front of it, we arrived at the memorial garden to confront the deepness of death, the memories and emotions, the absences and the longings, recognizing its reality. As Mary remains there weeping, we might relate, at the loss of loved

ones, at the unfairness of death, at all that seems much too final and out of our power or control.

Skipping ahead, the reading described the setting as a garden.

If our imaginations traveled again to Jerusalem, there's a spot known as the Garden Tomb, discovered 150 years ago. Some like it more than the ancient site marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulcher because instead of crowds and a huge domed building and all, that place still feels like a garden (at least I understand it does—I haven't personally visited).

Well, we had all of that right here. A memorial garden, surrounded by all the gardened grounds of the MCC—flowers and vegetable beds and trees, all tended by gardeners and landscapers and such.

Again, I don't want to draw the connections as too exact, but I believe the MCC gardens have some fit with the mistaken gardener we heard in the Gospel reading.

I believe there is something here of God tending creation, of God's own self, perhaps on this day recognized in Jesus, as cultivating life, bringing forth new growth, pruning away what's unnecessary, restoring goodness.

It's occasionally pointed out that the Bible begins with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and has a turning point at the tree of the cross and concludes with a vision in Revelation of a tree for the healing of the nations. This garden today also points us back to Eden's Paradise and the elation and re-creation (as our hymn "Morning Has Broken" sang) of God's intended goodness and the beauty of right relationships, and turns us toward our ending as God brings us home, back to nurturing life, to discovering there's no need in shame for our selves, restored to right relationships with God, each other, and creation.

Maybe with Mary, we have the mystery of how that's working out, our tears through some of it, our shock at the occasional glimpse, the mistakes where we think it's just a gardener, then the revelation of God's work.

And, you know, with all of that, I've also gotta say I'd been feeling some hesitancy about coming inside for worship, in spite of the chill outdoors.

With dawn at the memorial garden feeling so fitting for the Easter Gospel, I'd been reluctant to leave and come into a structure, to step out of that natural world, and to leave that special place of worship to come into the usual.

But maybe that fits, too. Maybe it fits with Mary having to leave the tomb and to go tell others, even as we announce with our own voices this morning.

Or maybe it's also the reminder that it's not about the garden tomb, not about a pilgrimage to supposedly holier sacred sites, not just on the other side of the world, not just as morning is breaking in the memorial garden, not only the places and occasions we count as special, but with Jesus who in the next verses appears in the disciples' homes, and who comes into this room, and into our homes, and is with gardeners, and with flowers and birds and rainbows and each morning to raise us to life.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Hymn: Because You Live, O Christ (NCH 231)

