

**“She Supposed He Was the Gardener”**  
**Sermon from John 20:11-18**  
**Given Sunday, April 24, 2022**  
**for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville**  
**Reverend Erika Marksbury, Senior Pastor**

*Mary stood weeping beside the tomb. Even as she wept, she stooped to peer inside, and there she saw two angels in dazzling robes. One was seated at the head and the other at the foot of the place where Jesus' body had lain. They asked her, “Why are you weeping?” She answered them, “Because they have taken away my Rabbi, and I don't know where they have put the body.” No sooner had she said this than she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. He asked her, “Why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” She supposed it was the gardener, so she said, “Please, if you are the one who carried Jesus away, tell me where you've laid the body and I will take it away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned to him and said, “Rabbi!” Jesus then said, “Don't hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to Abba God. Rather, go to the sisters and brothers and tell them, “I'm ascending to my Abba and your Abba, my God and your God!” Mary of Magdala went to the disciples. “I have seen the Teacher!” she announced. Then she reported what the Savior had said to her.*

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When I was fourteen a friend's father asked me if I knew any responsible young men looking for a job. Naturally I was automatically offended, told him I was a responsible young

woman who could do anything a young man could do, and that's how I ended up in the back of his van at two o'clock on Saturday morning, that weekend and every weekend of my fourteenth and fifteenth years. I worked alongside my friend, his son, rolling newspapers and stuffing them into plastic bags, passing them up to the front seat so the father could toss them into the yards of the houses where subscribers to the weekend edition of the Kansas City Star lived.

I don't know if you've spent a lot of time in close quarters with multiple stacks of newspapers hot off the press, but there is an inky smell that permeates the air, makes its way into your clothes and your hair and if the dark stains on your fingertips from rolling so many issues didn't give you away as a paper carrier, the smell just might.

Have you ever had a job that gave you away? Work where the uniform, or the accessories, or the duties were so obvious that people knew, when they saw you - or smelled you - that yeah, you - you work here.

I'm wondering what it was about Jesus in the garden that made Mary think he was the gardener. Of all the differences between last week's story and this one, this detail is the most compelling to me - that Mary supposed the man she saw was the gardener.

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When my boys and I were at Miller Woods a while back, we saw a weird pattern on the ground, and from far away were trying to imagine what it was. There were small logs laid out on the grassy hill, not far from the edge of the forest, small logs or sometimes just thick sticks, arranged in squares, two rows of squares, maybe twenty, thirty squares long. At first we felt like we'd discovered something alien, like crop circles, or something ancient, some old language of symbols. It was clearly intentional, but we couldn't imagine who had done it, or why.

When we got close enough to really investigate, we were even more confused; the logs seemed set in the places they were for no apparent reason - until, in the middle of one of those squares, we saw the tiniest seedling - not even a sapling yet, just barely inches out of the ground. That one discovery set us

off looking in all the other squares, and with some work, we found them - we found that each log square was set around another tiny, fragile tree. The squares weren't the work of aliens, they were the work of gardeners.

This is what gardeners do: they pay attention. They protect what's vulnerable. They nurture possibility. They cultivate life and beauty and what sustains us.

It's possible, though maybe a long shot, that Mary thought Jesus was the gardener because he was wearing overalls, or an apron, with pruning shears, maybe a small shovel, tucked into the pockets. It's possible she thought he was the gardener just because he was in the garden, although this is a public garden, and probably lots of people who don't work there wander through, like we still do public gardens today.

I wonder if Mary thought Jesus was the gardener because he had his hands in the dirt. Because he was paying attention to some vulnerable form there, because he was nurturing some possibility there.

Someone at Bible Study suggested that resurrection might be kind of a disorienting experience - not just for the friends and followers of the resurrected one, but for the one who suddenly finds himself alive again. Does he have any sense of what's happened? Of where he's been, and why? Of who he is? They asked, does he need some kind of grounding after all this - is that why we find him here, in the garden?

And I wonder, too, as he sits there among the shrubs, as he runs his hands through the dirt, do his own words come back to him? Does he consider the lilies of the field, how they neither toil nor spin, but God cares for them? Does he wonder about the kinds of soil in the hearts of his friends, how receptive they might be to his teachings now? Does he hear the words from the prophets who came before him, telling of how people are like grass, their faithfulness like flowers - and the grass withers, and the flowers fade, but God - God is forever? Does he remember the very oldest story, how the world began as a garden, where people walked in the evenings with God, and were surrounded by abundant life, in all its forms, and it was all very good?

Does he think about the work of a gardener, that also involves cutting back sometimes, uprooting sometimes? Does he consider that it's not only life that is abundant in a garden? It is also death. Decomposition is at work here, too. There is this complex interplay between what is coming to be and what is ceasing to be, what is flourishing and what is failing. Maybe nowhere else than in a garden is it more clear that to everything, there is a season.

What season has Jesus just come into here? What about us, the ones who inherit the story - and the ones who inherit this garden planet? What is it time for now?

In his poem, *Manifesto: Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, Wendell Berry offers a list of instructions for who and how we might be in these days. I hear these as ways of practicing resistance, and ways of being faithful, all at once. Here's an excerpt:

Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,

that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.  
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.  
Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion – put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts...  
Practice resurrection.

—

I wonder, what would mark us as gardeners? As ones who tend to the living and the dying all around us? This is the home of everyone and everything we know, and of multitudes unknown to us, but to someone, and to the creator of it all, all with its own value and beauty and gift and place and right to be.

Our Climate Action group has some suggestions on how to honor all of this: Reflect on the devotions passed out last week - they're still up on our website. Join in the work day at Miller Woods in May, learn more about the plastics recycling project in June, support this church's efforts to become a Creation Justice Congregation.

There are lots of ways we can root ourselves deeply in our shared home, and in our care for it, so that people might know that yeah, we work here. We live here and die here, we love here and cry here, and we join the countless others who work here, as gardeners. And the one who tends to the whole of it, that one does the same, right alongside us. Works here, as a gardener, and calls each of us, by name, into this forever project of practicing resurrection.