

REFLECTIONS FROM THE GARDEN: Joseph of Arimathea

John 19.38-42

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Let me clear up a couple things this morning.

First, if the last time you saw us was Christmas – and I mean no disrespect in saying that because we are always genuinely happy to see you whenever you are here – but, if the last time you saw us was Christmas, you probably heard us talking about Joseph and Mary. So, let's be clear that the Joseph and Mary we are talking about today are not the same people. This is the Easter Joseph and Mary. It may seem like the names haven't changed but the circumstances definitely have.

And you may relate to that. It may be that your life has changed drastically in the four months since Christmas. It has changed at least incrementally in those four months. And, if so, that means wherever you have been, you are in the right place this morning.

Second, it has often been said that it was only the women - with the exception of the beloved disciple, John - who stood by the cross. And it was only the women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection. That is true.

But there is one man who shows up in all four gospels at a crucial moment in this resurrection story to honor the body of Jesus with a proper burial. Here is the version of that story from the gospel of John.

John 19.38-42 (the *Inclusive Bible*)

After the crucifixion of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus – but a secret one, for fear of the religious authorities – asked Pilate for permission to remove the body of Jesus, and Pilate granted it. So Joseph came and took the body away. Nicodemus came as well – the same one who had first come to Jesus by night – and he brought one hundred

pounds of spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom. There was a garden in the place where Jesus had been crucified, and in the garden was a new tomb where no one had ever been buried. Since it was the day before the Sabbath and the tomb was nearby, they buried Jesus there.

So, meet the Easter Joseph.

What we can piece together from the all stories is that Joseph was a person of privilege – a “respected member” of the local religious and political council; a person of means; and, as John says, “a secret disciple” of Jesus.

Already I relate to the Easter Joseph. I am, as they say these days, “an institutionalist.” I work hard within the system to do the right thing. And I actually love the history and the legacy of organizations that continue to work for the common good. I love it that this is our 150th year of the institution we call Seattle First Baptist Church.

But I am also painfully aware that my privilege sometimes makes me reticent to take sides even when I know with whom I should be standing. And, at the same time, I experience the disappointment and frustration of watching the very institutions I have loved and have given my life to fail miserably in the cause of love and justice.

I think I get Easter Joseph. When I am sitting on a plane I dread the “what do you do for a living” question.

In those moments, there might be good reason to be a “secret disciple” of Jesus.

But that’s probably my privilege talking. Because good, respectable me doesn’t want to be confused with “those” people. Person of means that I am, I don’t want to be called out about my way of life and how it is

killing the planet. Person of impeccable political sensitivities, I don't want to be identified as that clueless white person who is blissfully unaware of what people like me have done to – or how we have benefited from – a system that continues to demean people of color.

But there does come a time, like this point in the life of Easter Joseph, when I have to come out of the closet; when I have to speak up; when I have to walk out of the beautiful tombs I have constructed for myself out of all the times I have refused to take a risk on the promise of new kind of life.

That risk came for Joseph when he stepped up “boldly,” as the gospel of Mark says, to ask for the body of Jesus in order to give him a proper burial.

Now maybe that doesn't seem like that big a deal. But it is clear that the whole point of a public execution like crucifixion was not only to torture individuals but to make their deaths a public example of what happens when you stand up to the government. Crucified people don't get buried. They just hang there as a lesson to frighten the masses into believing that resistance is futile.

Whatever it was that made Easter Joseph overcome his fear and decide that now was the time to take a risk, is not clear. Did the brutality of it all finally get to him? Did he finally realize what was at stake? Did he see the risk Jesus was taking and decide it was time for him to do the same? What was it?

We don't know. Just like we don't always know what will finally push us over the edge to take a risk and to do what is right.

What we do know is that the sources are unanimous. Easter Joseph did something out of character for a privileged institutionalist with a lot to lose. He went to Pilate and he asked for something that would strip

away his secret – that would identify him with someone who had been convicted of crimes against the state.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a position where the only thing that makes our lives true is to tell the truth about what really matters to us and what we really believe about the world – and to risk everything for it.

For Easter Joseph, that time was now. There was no more hiding. He took the risk of going to Pilate and asking for the body of Jesus.

And, interestingly, only the gospel of John says that Joseph buried Jesus in a *garden*. Every other story says that Joseph laid him in a rocky tomb.

And here's another interesting fact. None of the other stories say Jesus was *buried*. All the other ones say that Joseph laid the body of Jesus in a tomb – and in one case, in Joseph's own tomb.

John seems to want us to know two things about what Easter Joseph was up to: (1) the body of Jesus was *buried* and (2) his body was buried in a *garden*.

What happens when you bury something in a garden? If it is something organic, sometimes it grows. If it's a garden, that's what you are hoping – expecting even.

But here's the thing: every gardener takes the risk of burying something in hope that it will come up as the plant or flower or vegetable he or she is looking for. And sometimes, what does come up might not be exactly in the form that the gardener expected. Gardeners will tell you that no matter how much work you do, there is always some mystery about a garden.

I think the gospel of John is telling us that Easter Joseph is not only taking the risk of asking for the body of Jesus but he is taking the risk of burying that body in a garden where what comes back might not be what people expected. What comes back might haunt him with regret or bless him with a new kind of life.

There is a cautionary tale here. Some of us are really good at burying things –anger, resentment, abuse, prejudice, shame, even feelings in general. I suspect you know by now that the problem with burying those things is that they also tend to come back - they tend to rise to the surface in ways that sometimes don't help us very much.

Maybe Easter Joseph was tired of burying the truth about himself.

Donna Schaper is a pastor of our sister church, Judson Church in the Village in New York. She wrote a book about Lent and Easter called, *Calmly Plotting the Resurrection* – which I love as both conspiracy and gardening. She uses the garden and gardening as the context for understanding resurrection and she says:

The rising of Easter has a double plot. First, it is something we do – bulbs that we actually get down on our hands and knees and plant. If it makes you feel better, get your hands bloodied and dirtied by jabbing at the hard soil. But the rising is also something that we don't do. It is standing around and waiting.

Easter Joseph took the risk of doing something. He took the risk of asking for the body of Jesus. He took the risk of burying that body in a garden.

And then, he took one more risk. He waited. He waited for the morning to break.

NOTES

Donna E. Schaper, *Calmly Plotting the Resurrection* (United Church Press, 1995), p.67.

REFLECTIONS FROM THE GARDEN: MARY

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look* into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,* 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Before I was ordained and became a pastor, I worked in a garden. To make a beautiful job even cuter, I worked in a preschool garden. Now, all you adults are great, but 3-5 year olds are my people. I absolutely loved this job. Preparing the ground by weeding and hoeing and composting leftover organic material. Carefully planning and planting seeds, sometimes in long rows and sometimes in mounds and honestly, sometimes just scattered on the wind by a four-year-old. Even through the steamy Nashville summers, I thrived on being outside every day and living close to the earth and witnessing the brilliance of young, brand-new humans. Being in the garden was a perfect place to nurture my mind, my body, my spirit and my faith. Because miraculous things happen in the garden. Plots of ground where a child dumped a whole packet of watermelon seeds wound up being far more fruitful than the carefully-managed sections I planned; they just grew slowly and steadily. There were always just enough strawberries for each preschooler to have one. Plants that looked like they'd died, either from drought or heat or too many five year olds pulling at them all the time, still gave off seeds so their species would continue on. Squashes and pumpkins and decorative gourds grew out of the compost piles because they just couldn't be kept from growing! As the saying from Jurassic Park goes, "Life finds a way."

You just can't keep life down in a garden! Perhaps this is why there are so many wisdom sayings that have to do with gardens and harvest and planting and seeds. A favorite of mine, heard often from the mouths of those advocating for justice, and especially quoted by people searching for the disappeared students in Mexico, is "they tried to bury us but they didn't know we were seeds." As Pastor Tim shared just moments ago, it often happens that

what is buried comes back, sometimes in ways we never expected or never dreamed about. Seeds, harmless though they may be, looking like they're devoid of life, actually are harboring immense amounts of energy. Seeds, planted in fertile soil, can rise again and give life to the next generation. Seeds, in the right conditions, remind us that resurrection isn't a one-time event. It is ongoing, unstoppable, prophetic force.

Perhaps this is why Mary went to the garden on that early morning so long ago. She should have known that Jesus was dead. Mary had seen him die. Mary had seen it all--she had traveled with Jesus, heard him preach and teach and heal. She had been with him at dinner. I imagine she ate the bread and drank from the cup, perhaps being confused at what Jesus was talking about: where was he going that she could not follow? And despite her confusion, she stayed. After watching Jesus be arrested and beaten and paraded through the streets carrying the cross on which he was to be crucified, she stayed at the foot of the cross. She stayed with his mother Mary and the other women. She stayed, when the male disciples went away, afraid for their own lives that they would be associated with this man who was executed like a criminal. She stayed, while Joseph of Arimathea retrieved God's body and lay it in a tomb. She stayed, while the stone was rolled in front of the tomb. Mary of Magdala should know what death means, having gotten up close and personal with it. She should know the finality of death, that once the body is washed and prepared and wrapped in linen and laid away, that body is not coming back to life.

And yet...miraculous things happen in the garden. And so that's where Mary went. The garden, the site of God's original creation, the place where "the Word was with God and the Word was God" and "all things came into

being through God and the Word.” The garden, the site of Jesus’ prayers and sanctuary. The garden, the location of the tomb hewn out of the rock. The garden, where the things that are buried rise again. We come, this morning, on the first day of the week, to the garden, asking “is it true?” This is what theologian Karl Barth said that every person who shows up to church holds in their hearts: the question, “is it true?”

The question this morning is, “is it true that Friday not the end of the story? Is it true that Love really can not be put down? Is it true that God’s justice is coming, whether the authorities and the warriors and the politicians and the empires say it’s not?”

Nathan Roberts from The Salt Collective shared these words on Facebook on Friday:

“Good Friday is the day Christians remember the public execution of Jesus. A day we are reminded of the consequences of living with revolutionary love. Love that stands beside assaulted women, love that flips over corrupt tables, love that throws parades, love that tells people to pray for “our daily bread” not just “my daily bread”, and love that provides free healthcare to those who society gave up on. Love without cultural boundaries, without fear of the government laws, without fear of religious judgement, without fear of dying. Jesus was publicly executed by a world that refused to change. And on Friday his body hung as a warning to all his followers. But Love would not stay dead.”

Miraculous things happen in the garden. Maybe Mary, showing up in the garden, not sure if she was too early or too late, would say, “Pilate tried to bury Jesus, but he didn’t know Jesus was a seed. The empire tried to bury

Jesus, but they didn't know Jesus was a seed. The powers of death and destruction tried to bury Jesus, but they didn't know Jesus was a seed."

Jesus, planted in the ground, buried in a tomb, rose again early in the morning, a life-cycle completed and yet ongoing in seed and bud and blossom.

But perhaps Jesus is also a gardener. After all, that's what Mary thought when she saw him, when she heard him call her name so personally, so intimately, so lovingly. So if Jesus is a gardener, maybe it is by being a seed that does its own propagating, like wild dandelions shed their seeds to their surroundings. Maybe it was no mistake that Mary thought the Risen Christ was the gardener, because he was living proof of the resurrection. He had planted a seed of hope in the midst of the despair of Good Friday and the waiting of Holy Saturday and the deep night going into Sunday morning. Jesus had planted a seed of hope amidst the sacred spaces that were burning and the faithful who are grieving and the modern-day crucifixion that keeps claiming people for death who have so much more living to do. Christ Jesus has planted a seed in each of our hearts, in each of us a tiny resurrection, a small piece of Godself loving and dying with us.

Because that is the true miracle of the resurrection--when the empire tries to bury us, push us to the margins, separate our families, destroy our home Mother Earth, drown us in anxiety and apathy, console us and keep us complacent...the empire forgot that we are seeds and we rise again. We are planted in this garden, in loving community, to be nourished and challenged and loved and held accountable by each other for the flourishing of all. WE can be the resurrection because Jesus planted the seeds of resurrection in each of us, preparing each of us to respond to God's voice as God calls our names,

telling us that the powers of this world, the powers of might and force and destruction and even death, hold no sway against love, justice, mercy and grace.

And so, this morning, I remind you of the words of one of my favorite poets, lifelong Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry: “practice resurrection.” And practice we must, every day. Like Mary, we are showing up in the garden, maybe some of us fearing it is too late for redemption, some of us feeling like we are too early, it’s too soon, for new life to take shape...but y’all, just like Mary, we are right on time. Right on time to catch the first rays of dawn breaking through. Right on time to receive a promise of something more than grief and depression and anxiety and fear. Right on time to hear the God of Love speak our names in a way only God can call us...like the way only your mother can hug you just-so, or only a dear friend can discern the sly winks and nods. We’re right on time to witness God turning the world upside down, bringing forth something miraculous from something grievously mundane. We’re right on time to witness the seed bursting from its seed coat, sending its delicate tendrils up through the soil to convey a message of life ongoing, flourishing from bud into blossom. We’re right on time to be resurrected, out of the holy compost of our own lives, ready to see the rays of the Son, we’re ready to burst into bloom for all to see.

Let us go forth to BE the resurrection this day, and every day of our lives.

May it ever be so.