

The Gardener Indeed!

John 20:11-18

Call: Ps 105: 1-5, 8, 45b (NIV)

Scripture: John 20:1-10 (ESV)

I. Introduction

A. Introduction

It is finished but it has not ended. It is finished but it has not ended. Wonder of wonders the cross does not end John's Gospel. One of my favorite stories (which I've shared before) is of the Welsh king Brude asking St. Brendan, a Columban Monk of the 6th century, "Supposing I accept your Gospel and become Christ's man, what will I find?" St. Brendan famously answered him, "If you accept the Gospel of Christ and become his man, you will stumble upon wonder upon wonder and every wonder true" (Adam, 2).

As I have been working through these texts in John over the past 6 months, this is where I've been living, in wonder. As I have studied the passion texts, I have lived in wonder at Jesus' love for us and his determination to do his Father's will and drink the cup. And, then, as I have lived in these resurrection texts, I have been filled with even more wonder. I hope I can convey a little bit of my wonder to you this morning.

B. Context

This week in John, we are midway through that first resurrection appearance on the morning of that first Easter. You just heard the first half read for our Scripture reading. As you heard, Mary Magdalene, Peter and John are the first ones at the empty tomb. However, much of John's focus is on the grave clothes. They are seemingly still wound as if the body of Jesus had simply evaporated through them. As we said last week, this is important because John is contrasting what happened with Jesus with what happened to Lazarus in chapter 11. When Lazarus came back from the grave, he was still bound in his grave clothes. Jesus, on the other hand, leaves all the grave clothes behind, signaling that something different has happened to him. Lazarus was rescued from death whereas Jesus passed through death and came out the other side. Lazarus would die again, but Jesus had entered into a whole new existence where he would never die again. Lazarus had been resuscitated. Jesus had been resurrected.

So, we pick up the story today after John and Peter had gone back to their homes, leaving Mary Magdalene at the tomb. Loyal Mary is what she's called. Loyal Mary: the last one at the cross. The first one at the tomb and the last one at the tomb. This morning, I invite you to come with me as we walk along with Mary again this week as she experiences the reality and wonder of the resurrection, John 20, beginning in verse 11. And, I'll be reading from the ESV.

II. The Angels (11-12)

[11](#) But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. [12](#) And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. (ESV)

A. Introduction

Loyal Mary stays at the tomb and weeps. John tells us twice that she is weeping, suggesting she is deeply grieving. Like John in last week's text, she does not go into the tomb, but kneels down and looks into it. From the next few verses, we know she's still looking for a body, a dead body. But she doesn't see a body, she sees two angels, dressed in white. The presence of angels implies the presence of God, again emphasizing that this tomb was not a place of grave-robbing, but a place of holiness.

B. Two Angels

John is again very careful in his attention to detail. He doesn't tell us about the kind of bench on which the angels are sitting, but tells us exactly where the angels were seated. One was sitting where Jesus' head had rested, and one was sitting where Jesus' feet had rested. Someone has said, "Jesus was crucified between two thieves and resurrected between two angels" (Johnson class).

Why two angels and why seated in this arrangement? Well, where else in Scripture do we find two angels seated like this? Answer: On the cover of the Ark of the Covenant.

In Exodus, God tells Moses to make two cherubim for the cover of the Ark, one on one end and one on the other end (Ex 25:18-19). And the place between the two cherubim is called the Mercy Seat, or the place of atonement. This is where the blood of the lamb was spread, the blood that atoned for sin. It is the seat of grace. Additionally, God tells Moses that between the two cherubim is where *"I will meet you"* (Ex 25:22).

And what John wants us to see here with the two angels is a new seat of grace. John is confirming again that Jesus is where we meet the living God. And John is confirming again that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice, for his body laid between the two angels. Here is *"the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29). And, the tomb now serves as the "ark of the new covenant," for it contained the new seat of grace (Klink, 843). This new world is grounded in grace, amazing grace!

The two angels now speak to Mary, verse 13.

III. The Gardener (13-15)

[13](#) They 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." [14](#) Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15](#) Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" 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.”

A. Introduction

The angels begin by asking Mary why she is weeping.

But, we know why she’s weeping don’t we? She’s lost everything. Everything that matters to her. She had felt loved by Jesus. She had felt accepted by Jesus. She had been freed from the grip of evil by Jesus. She had found joy and peace in him. She had felt the great dignity from him. He’s probably the first man to treat her with dignity. And, now he was dead, and she can’t find the body! Understandably, she is so overcome by grief, she simply cannot understand what is happening.

The angels know why she is weeping. But, the angels know something else too. They know what has really happened, and they know that her tears do not match the new reality.

B. Jesus Appears

So, while looking at the angels, Mary becomes aware of another presence behind her. So she turns around and sees a man. John tells us the man is Jesus, but Mary doesn’t know that yet. Here’s the first appearance of the resurrected Jesus.

C. Jesus Speaks

Jesus speaks, and asks the same question as the angels. *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* He of course knows why, but he asks his question because he wants to bring Mary (and us) out of the darkness. Jesus asks a lot of questions because questions have a way of engaging us, drawing us out and probing the deeper reality of something.

He then follows with another question, *“Whom are you seeking?”* This question has been the question of John’s Gospel. It was Jesus’ first question to his would-be disciples. It was his question to the arresting party in Gethsemane. And, now, he asks it to Mary. *“Mary, whom are you seeking?”*

D. The Gardener

Mary still doesn’t know who He is and assumes He is the cemetery maintenance worker, or “gardener” for short. This is the only time in the New Testament that this word, “gardener” occurs. Mary assumes this man is the gardener. As it turns out, Mary is absolutely correct! This man is *the* gardener with a capital G, God the Gardener! God the gardener was walking in the garden in the cool of the morning, the garden that had become a cemetery.

E. Gardener Background

Now John had been preparing us all along for this moment. He begins his Gospel with what? *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...”* (John 1:1). This, of course, echoes Genesis 1:1, *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”* In the first creation account, God creates through the Word for six days, *“And God*

said... And God said... And God said... After he creates humanity in his image on day six, he places them in a garden, the garden of Eden. And, it is there where Genesis also says that God walked with humanity *"in the garden in the cool of the day"* (Gen 3:8).

Back to John, chapter 18. The Passion narrative began in a garden, the *Garden* of Gethsemane where, as Jesus is being arrested, he says that he is *"I AM,"* which causes the arresting party to draw back and fall to the ground.

In chapter 19, John told us that the crucifixion and resurrection both occur in a garden (19:41).

And, now, chapter 20, on the first day of a new creation, Mary turns around and sees the gardener, God the gardener, in the cool of the morning. But, at first, she doesn't recognize him. Through her tears, she asks him where the body is and if he moved it, she will go get it!

F. Retrieving The Body

She will? I don't know how big Mary is, but I'm not sure she would actually be able to carry a dead corpse. But, this comment speaks to the depth of her love for Jesus. She is going to do whatever it takes. But it's also a testimony to how much grief can get in the way of things. Standing right in front of her is the resurrected Jesus, yet she is blinded by her grief.

Then, he speaks again, verse 16.

IV. The Commissioning (16-18)

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for 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.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

A. Introduction

Here's the moment of revelation! Jesus says to her, "Mary."

I've tried to figure out how to say that. I'm not sure how Jesus said it. "Mar-y" or "Mary" or... I wish I knew. But I do know that in chapter 10, Jesus had told his followers that he was the Good Shepherd who calls his own sheep by name, and they know his voice (John 10:3). Regardless if the voice is heard in Scripture or a book or through a friend or through circumstances or the Good Shepherd himself, the sheep know his voice.

And, hearing her name on Jesus' lips breaks through the darkness. She responds with *"Rabboni,... teacher,"* which he is. Of course, we know he is a whole lot more.

B. The Voice

So, what was it that brought Mary into Easter's new reality? It was not the face of Jesus. It was not the touch of Jesus. It was his voice calling her by name. This is such an important point to

make because that's the way it is for us today. We can't see his face yet, we can't touch him yet, but we can hear his voice calling our name.

C. The Hug

Mary, understandably, throws her arms around Jesus with a big bear hug! Wouldn't you?

Jesus says, *"Do not cling to me."* These words cause all kinds of strange interpretations. But, he doesn't say this because it's wrong to hold him. He doesn't say this because there is something ethereal about him. He says it because things are different now. The old way Mary knew Jesus has now changed. Remember Mary was preoccupied with finding a physical body. But now, she can't rely on his physical presence anymore. Essentially, what he is saying is "Do not hold onto me because I'm ascending to the Father where I can pour out my Spirit. And, My Spirit will be my presence with you and in you."

Everything has changed due to the crucifixion, resurrection and soon-to-be ascension. And, she must now go tell everyone this difference.

But, there's even more to these verses. And we've now come to the heart of this text.

D. The New Family

In verse 17, Jesus says, *"Go to my brothers [and sisters]..."* (The word here is inclusive to both male and female disciples.) This is the first time in the Gospel of John where Jesus calls his followers *"brothers and sisters."* Before now, this term was only used of biological kin. But here, he calls his followers brothers and sisters for the first time. He had previously called them disciples or students. On Thursday night in the upper room, he had called them friends. And, now, brothers and sisters. Why now?

Jesus instructs Mary to tell the disciples, *"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"* (20:17). Go tell them that I'm alive, but even more, tell them that there is now a new order of things. Tell them that because I have died and rose again, they can now call my God "Father." And, they and you can now enjoy the same relationship I have enjoyed for all eternity, the same relationship I have with the Father.

I'm going to pause there and come back to this thought at the end, because I want to finish our text.

E. She Obeys

Mary, whose grief has been turned into joy, obeys Jesus and goes. She's the first person sent with the Gospel. For this reason, Mary has been called "The apostle to the apostles," for her message is "apostolic" (Klink 849). As Isaiah had said, *"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news"* (Isa 52:7). And, the world gets turned upside-down with her good news.

And that's our text today, an amazing wonder-filled text. So, what are some implications from this text? I have four this morning.

V. Implications

A. The Presence of Jesus

First of all, Mary's story tells us that long before we recognize Jesus' presence, he is present. He's there. Jesus is there.

How long had He been standing there behind Mary? We don't know. But, I wonder if when the angels asked Mary why she was weeping, I wonder if they were looking over her shoulder to Him standing right behind her.

In Luke, how long was it before the disciples on the Emmaus Road realized Jesus was there? The text says that it was long enough for "*Jesus to explain to them all the Scriptures written about him*" (Lk 24:27).

How long was it before you realized he was there?

He's there. As someone has said, because of the resurrection, "Jesus is the eternal contemporary," always there long before we know it (Johnson).

B. The Power of Grief

Secondly, Mary's story tells us why we are typically unaware of Jesus' presence. As we've seen in this text and throughout John, it takes a while for people to understand what is happening. Mary is not getting the point even though the facts are right in front of her. And, why? I think the answer is grief. Mary is overcome by grief. But Mary is unaware because of the intense sorrow, the disappointment and the loss of hope. Grief has so dominated her, and I don't blame her, she doesn't see what was there, she doesn't see who was there.

Grief is a powerful force, as many of you know. It can cause us not to see what is right before us, and can cause us to make false deductions for what we do see. And sometimes, all that grief and pain so fills our minds and hearts, we miss the fact that the risen one is right in front of us.

C. The Point is Jesus

But, thirdly, what we also learn in this text is that there is also a difference between what and whom. Mary came to the tomb looking for a *what*, for an *it*. She came to the tomb looking for a corpse, a dead lord. That's why Jesus has to ask her, "Whom are you seeking?" He's helping Mary change her focus. It's not "it," but "whom."

And, I think that can be a problem for us as well? We are seeking "it" instead of "Him." We're seeking peace or joy or wisdom or meaning or purpose or direction in life, and we're not finding *it*, because *it* is not the point. The point is *Him*. We find *it* when we find *Him*. The point is Him and His presence. We find peace when we find Him. We find joy when we find Him. We find wisdom when we find Him. We find meaning and purpose when we find Him. We find life when we find him.

“Whom are you seeking?” Jesus asks.

D. The People of God

And, lastly, Mary’s story tells us what Jesus does when He makes himself known to us. And, this is the great gift in the Gospel of John. When he comes to us and makes himself real to us, he brings us into a new relational existence that has been worked out for us in his death and resurrection.

The great wonder of this story is that we can now, on this side of Easter, have a relationship with Jesus that is, in many ways, better than the one Mary and the other disciples had. It is better than holding him and seeing him, for it extends beyond physical presence.

This was anticipated throughout the upper room discourse when Jesus spoke of the coming of the paraclete, the Holy Spirit. In John 14, Jesus had said, *“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you... [when the Holy Spirit is sent in my name to be with you and in you]”* (John 14:17-18, 26). Jesus’ ascension will open the door for the coming of the Spirit who will abide with us *“to the end of the age”* (Matt 28:20). In this way, Jesus will be fully present at all times with his disciples.

And, it is the Spirit, as Paul says in Galatians, that enables us to pray *“Abba Father,”* (Gal 4:6). Jesus says, *“Do not cling to me”* (20:17). Why? Because he is ascending to *“my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”*

As we’ve seen in John, Jesus lives his whole life in deep intimacy with the Father. He’s the only begotten Son, the one and only Son, and now, because he died and rose again, he brings us into that same identity.

In relationship with him as his sisters and brothers, we become like Him now, real daughters and sons of our Abba Father. That’s what he’s saying. We now have the same rights, same privileges and same status that he has enjoyed for all of eternity. And, we not only live in relationship with Him, we also live in his relationship with the Father.

Now, here’s the cool part about John. Back in chapter 1, in the very center of the prologue, we get this statement from John: *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...”* (John 1:12). John goes on to say that this identity does not come from family name or nationality or achievements. So, it seems John, in his prologue, is telling us that the story he is going to tell is going to lead up to this great moment of Jesus defining the people of God, the new family of God. And, this is the announcement he is making on Easter morning. The relationship He has had with the Father from all eternity is now the relationship into which we have been invited, because he died and rose again. This is your new family. This is where you belong, where you call Jesus brother and God Abba Father.

VI. Conclusion

Let me close with a quote from GK Chesterton which captures the thrust of our passage today. This is from his famous book, *Everlasting Man*:

“On the third day [Mary] coming at daybreak to the place, found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways [she] realized the new wonder; but even [she] hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance of the gardener, God walked again in the garden, in the cool, not of the evening, but of the dawn” (Chesterton, 214).

Whereas in the first garden, life brought forth death, in this garden, death brings forth life, for here is *“the lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29).

Wonder upon wonder and every wonder true. Amen.

Benediction

Because he is risen, we are family. And, there is no place you can go where he will not be present. So go in the assurance that wherever you go this week, he is there in front of you, he’s there behind you, he’s there on your right, he’s there on your left, he’s there above you and beneath you, around you and in you. Have a great week!

Resources

Adam, David and Jean Freer, *The Open Gate : Celtic Prayers for Growing Spirituality*

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Burge, Gary, *John (NIV Application Commentary)*

Chesterton, GK, *Everlasting Man*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching John (Regent College Course)*

Klink, Edward, *John (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*

Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Light Has Come*