

Gardeners of Hope
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
April 1, 2018

John 20:11-18

We began Lent at the tomb of Lazarus. A dead man, someone weeping outside the tomb, and the stone then rolled away.

This morning we're back outside a tomb, with a stone rolled away, someone weeping outside the tomb, and new life again. It is a story we've told before. It is a story we'll tell again.

And I love how John tells it —the mistaken identity, the discovery, the tenderness, the proclamation.

I love that Mary is there. She goes before dawn, by herself, to sit by the tomb of her beloved friend and teacher. When she discovers the tomb is empty, she runs to tell the other disciples, but then she comes back. When Peter and the other disciple leave, she stays. She doesn't try to hide from her sorrow; she doesn't try to escape the confusion and uncertainty; she doesn't run away from the possibility of new life.

I love the case of mistaken identity. Mary is standing right beside her dear friend, but she doesn't realize it is him. Of course she doesn't. She watched him die a horrible death. She cannot recognize him because she cannot imagine that he could be there. Jesus doesn't judge her; he doesn't suggest that she should have known who he was. Jesus understands what it is to be human. He understands that sometimes we are simply not ready to discover the new life—the new hope—that is right beside us.

I love Mary's moment of awakening. It happens when Jesus calls her name—because that's what Jesus did in his life. He called people by name—acknowledging them for who they were, looking beyond categories and judgments. He looked at a leper and saw a spirit yearning to soar. He looked at a tax collector and recognized a lonely man who needed a chance to offer hospitality. He looked at Mary and honored her as a whole person, a beloved child of God. So when the man she thinks is the gardener calls her by name, Mary gets it. As she awakens to her true identity, she awakens to his identity as well. It is Jesus. She awakens to the presence of the sacred

in her midst, to hope in human form, hope that even death could not destroy.

I love what Mary does next. She does not cling to her beloved friend. She doesn't try to preserve the moment for herself. She runs to tell the others. She proclaims the good news that will soon be spread far and wide: I have seen the Lord. Christ is risen. Hope is alive!

This story draws us in, inviting us to put ourselves in Mary's role. Like Mary, we find ourselves in places of sorrow and uncertainty, in places where hope has been promised to us but we cannot imagine what hope could possibly mean. Can we, with Mary, find the courage to stay? Can we resist the urge to run away from our pain, to hide from uncertainty? Even when we cannot envision hope, can we stay open to possibility?

Like Mary, we yearn to be acknowledged for the whole of who we are. We long for someone to see past the boxes we check off—past our size and age and marital status, past our race and profession and favorite sports teams. We hope for healing of our fractured identities, our broken lives.

Like Mary, we encounter people we don't know or understand. We try to put them into categories so we can figure out who they are. It must be the gardener. A stranger. A friend. An enemy. When Mary reaches out to the supposed gardener, she discovers who she is, and who he is. Are we willing to risk reaching out? Might we discover Christ in the gardener?

When we enter into this story from the perspective of Mary, we are challenged to take risks—to risk staying present to pain and possibility, to risk reaching out to someone who just might be Christ for us. What happens if we enter this story from a different angle? What if we become that mysterious figure she assumes is the gardener?

Soon we will embark on our church's Giving Garden season. This year, we will be joined by the United Methodist church who are breaking ground on a fourth giving garden. Ordinarily, the role of the gardener can be a solo affair. But with the Giving Garden ministry, we garden by committee. And that can sometimes feel daunting. Gardening together involves much more than scattering a few random seeds and watching them grow.

There's planning. What vegetables grow best in this soil and this climate? What will our clients at the food pantry prefer to eat? When do we plant?

What about rabbits? Or bugs? Who will mend the fence? When it comes time to weed, will the volunteer that enters the plot know the difference between a weed and a seedling? What if something in the automatic watering system gets clogged or dislodged? We can maybe take comfort knowing we are not doing it alone; our gardening partners bring many good ideas, energy and expertise.

Sometimes it can be daunting. It is even more daunting to claim the role of gardener in this story—to be a gardener of hope. It's not just about scattering random acts of kindness and then sitting back admiring their growth. To be a gardener of hope requires listening and learning—listening to what a friend really needs instead of what I want her to need, learning about a complex social issue so I can be a voice for effective public policy.

To be a gardener of hope requires consistency. Single acts of caring are nice, but regular, faithful presence is more likely to bear fruit. It requires patience, for as with seeds we plant in a garden, our acts of compassion may not germinate for a long time. It requires humility, for we are no more able to make hope grow than we are to make a tomato plant bear fruit. And it requires trust: trust that what we do matters, trust that we don't do it alone.

Gardeners of hope. It's a metaphor, of course. There are other metaphors for this role as well. Hosts of hope. Light of hope. Friends of hope. Artists of hope. There are many ways to envision our role in this resurrection story.

Mary spoke to someone she identified as the gardener, and in that encounter, she awakened to the presence of the risen Christ. If we are faithful to our role—gardening, hosting, enlightening, befriending—perhaps someone we encounter will awaken to resurrection. Maybe we will be Christ for them. With God's help, we can be part of the rebirth of hope in their lives.

To choose hope is to join Mary Magdalene in the garden—choosing to be present to pain and uncertainty, choosing to be open to possibilities we cannot yet envision. To be hope is to become the gardener— or host or friend or light—, trusting that Christ is present in our planting and hosting, our befriending and enlightening.

By the grace of God, we can choose hope. By the grace of God, we can be hope. Christ is risen—for us and through us. Hope is alive—for us and in us. Thanks be to God. Happy Easter! Amen.