

Text: John 20:10-18

Title: Misidentifying Jesus or “She Supposed He Was the Gardener”

Theme: Jesus is not a Faraway King or Bosom Buddy or the Pilot for a flight to heaven: he is the Gardener, connecting us to the land, to creation, nature and our indigenous brothers and sisters might help us understand this. We need to strengthen our Reformed, Biblical creation theology.

Before sermon:

We Christians hunker down for 40 days of Lent, but then the joy and surprise of new life on Easter often is celebrated for just a single day. In fact, there are also 40 days of Easter-tide -- until Ascension Day – and we ought to live into this season just as deeply.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in God’s Family:

As a kid, I grew up in Toronto, just off Yonge Street, but I gravitated more often toward the large, forested green spaces in the city, most of all the ravine along one of the tributaries of the Don River where I lived. In hindsight, I felt God’s delight and beauty in cracking the ice on the creek in winter and picking the wild raspberries in summer. I also shuddered at his power in a thunderstorm and felt vulnerable when untamed gangs of teenagers were nearby. Nature was intriguing, adventurous, and full of wonder.

Church seemed like a radically different experience. It was always indoors and involved lots of sitting still and listening to a book being read followed by speeches. The people were great, the songs were captivating at times, but it always seemed a world away from my experiences in nature. *Why did I have to leave nature for church, and leave church to be in nature?*

What I want to do today is demonstrate how a Reformed, Biblical theology reveals an Easter for all creation. Resurrection is for nature, too. The church of Jesus Christ is not primarily about saving individual souls to whisk them from earth to heaven, but a redemption project that brings heaven down to earth.

We, like Mary, have misidentified Jesus and his mission. Let's look at the Bible text.

In the Garden

Jesus' death rattled the more than the disciples. Matthew 27 tells us the land became dark for three hours from noon until 3 pm, and "the earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open." It was like the creation was participating in the violence of the crucifixion—all the betrayals, the desertion, the torture, the injustice, the sadistic cruelty and finally, the God-forsaken loneliness—all reflected in nature's groaning. The stones cried out.

John 19:41 is a remarkable text: it records "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb." *Golgotha had a garden*. And this is where they buried Jesus. Matthew 27:61 says that Mary and Mary Magdalene were there, and sat by the tomb, watching, remembering (The VOICE adds those two words).

"At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden was a new tomb." Let me playfully suggest this morning that all the best gardens are given generous loads of compost—rotting vegetable matter. As Mary and Mary keep watch, Jesus decomposes in death, and so does all the brokenness, stubbornness, and failures of Israel decompose with him. If Jesus death is about anything, it's about turning things over and around, it's about reversing death and turning it to life, it's about taking all the idolatries, rebellions, and injustices of Israel, and symbolically, *our* treacheries and travesties, and burying them. Like compost in the garden.

Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene is back to the garden. Now, Mary is no prostitute: if you look at Luke 8:1-3, you'll see she is listed as one of the three female patrons of Jesus. She is a woman of means, and she brings spices for the body, says Mark. Jesus had healed her of demonic illness, and now she came to anoint his body as the bereaved friend. But the body is gone.

Angels, more commonly translated as messengers, are there, but this seems of no comfort to her. She is startled, upset, and becomes frantic. Who could have stolen the body? In the movie, *The Gospel of John*, Jesus is bending over behind a fern, and Mary can't see him clearly. He looks like a gardener, tending some plants. Mary misidentifies him through her tears, hoping he knows something about this cryptic turn of events.

She supposed he was the gardener and so asks where the body is. Ironic. The body is right there in front of her.

This was it. This was the great moment. The Lord has risen from the dead, death and sin and hell have been conquered, and he lives! But Mary misidentifies Jesus. She misses that her Master stands before her, victorious over the grave. She mistakes him for a gardener...

... but even through his wounds, Jesus recognizes her. The Crucified God recognizes us all in our distress.

John's Creation Theme

I want to pause here in the story because I want to step back from this moment, and show you that Mary's mistake in light of John's gospel and the whole New Testament is no mistake. Jesus is, and will always be, the Master Gardener.

I found this article entitled "The Creation Theme in the Gospel of John" and its 39 pages long, elaborating on references to creation throughout John's gospel. To touch on just a few places, the gospel patterns itself after Genesis from the start. The gospel's opening line: "In the beginning..." and the next verse repeats, speaking of the Word, the Logos: "He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

There are references to plants, seeds, and vines through the gospel. In chapter 12:24 Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." In

chapter 15:1 he explains, “I am the vine and my Father is the gardener.”

Even in this scene in chapter 20, some say Jesus acts as the New Adam, tending the garden, calling Mary “woman” and then saying her name “Mary” just as Adam named Eve. The two angels guard the tomb as the cherubim guarded Eden, but this New Eve does not disobey as Eve did, but does precisely what Jesus asks by going to tell the disciples the good news. It is *Eden redeemed*.

The article concludes, saying that within John’s gospel, Jesus is both the Creator and the new Adam who continues, completes, and renews the work of creation.

Jesus the Master Gardener

Now if you think John didn’t intentionally mean to allude to Jesus as the Master Gardener, theologically, it’s certainly an appropriate title for the risen Christ within the sweep of Scripture. Take for example, Roman 8, which talks about the resurrection of our bodies, testifying that creation was subject to frustration, and it groans in the hope, verse 21 that “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” *The Message* version says, “the creation itself can hardly wait for what is coming next.”

If this creation-wide salvation is news to us, it could be that we have misidentified Jesus, too. Throughout history, Christians have misidentified Jesus as a Conqueror of other peoples, lands and creatures. Today, he is often mistaken as a Private Saviour for Me, or the Chaplain to Only My Country, rather than the Jesus of the Whole Planet.

Have we misrecognized Jesus as Lord of Spiritual Things Alone rather than the Master Gardener of all Creation? If so, *Mary’s mistake is our corrective this Easter-tide*.

Reformational theologian N. T. Wright says over and over in his books, echoing the biblical themes of creation, fall, and redemption, and explaining: “‘Resurrection’ [in the New Testament] was not simply a pious hope about new life for dead people. It carried with it all that was associated with [Israelite] return from exile itself: forgiveness of sins, the re-establishment of Israel as the true humanity of the covenant God, and the renewal of all creation...” In effect, *the resurrection of Jesus is the model of what God is doing with the whole created order.*

The first Easter song in the Grey Hymnal was “Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!”; and do you remember the next line? “all creation joins to say, Alleluia!” Why would all creation rejoice if it was going to be left behind? This is not rapture theology. It continues: “Sing O heavens and earth reply!”

The gospel of Mark curiously ends with Jesus saying to his disciples: “preach the gospel to all creatures.” Why? It’s for all things, not just people.

And we know our choking planet needs to hear that good news now as much as ever. Let’s not misidentify Jesus. He is the Master Gardener, a wonderful disguise.

Not only the bible, theology, and hymns recognize this deep truth. Centuries of painters represented Jesus as a gardener. Here is a painting from Rembrandt van Rijn called “Christ and St Mary Magdalen at the Tomb.” 1638. The light of dawn is coming over the horizon breaking through the darkness of the tomb, and Jesus is depicted with a giant gardener’s hat, with a shovel in one hand and some other tool, perhaps a knife in his belt. He is set to work. He is actually a gardener.



Now here is a more modern painting entitled “The Gardener” by Joel Briggs, an artist from California, painted during COVID. He is deeply concerned that we not to misidentify and diminish the risen Christ. He writes about this work: “In my daily sufferings with anxiety and the fragility of existence, a Christ who redeems me to an ambiguous half-existence of a floaty nirvana is destructive.” Instead, he says, “I need a Christ with dirt under his fingernails and oxygen in his lungs, who is bringing new order to the old chaos, new life to the old, worn-out wastelands.”



And you can see the references to Noah here. The dove, the rain, the sprig of a plant. Did you know the Covenant with Noah in Genesis 9 wasn't just with Noah? Six times in that chapter the Bible records that the covenant to never destroy the earth was with “you, me, and? ...every living creature.”

What I like about this painting is that it shows the risen Christ as wounded and in the midst of a scorched earth. Its real. The landscape is bleak. But with his dove, a seedling to plant, and his shovel to dig into the dirt, he looks ready to turn the tide of ruin.

This is important for Christians living in a consumer society: Jesus calls us even as he comforts us. His first concern is not our materialistic gain, our affluence, our prosperity, but rather our participation in his renewal of all creation.

Yes, like with Mary, Jesus says your name. He knows you, and he cares for you, and he speaks in tones that you recognize, that tell you that you are loved. This artist Joel Briggs said it well: “I need a Christ with dirt under his fingernails and oxygen in his lungs, who is bringing new order to the old chaos, new life to the old, worn-out wastelands.”

But also like Mary, he says don't cling to me for your own comfort and assurance: go and spread the news. There is work to be done.

Application

She supposed he was the gardener. I hope you can agree that Mary's mistake can be our corrective. We affirm this view of resurrection in our contemporary testimony, which is called what? "Our World Belongs to God."

Now, this is the time of year when we break out the shovels and the seedlings and care for our own backyards. It is important to make our own neighbourhoods beautiful. But as we see the photos from the Artemis 2 spacecraft, we realize our backyards extend all the way around a great big blue ball and beyond. And if you zoomed in a little from those photos you'll see bombs exploding around the Sea of Galilee and the Persian Gulf. You'll see clouds of smog blanketing the larger cities, and if you zoom in even further, you can see all the plastic floating in the oceans.

I want you to think back to Genesis, and recall that part of being the image of God in Adam was a commission to take care of the garden. It seems that both Adam and all his descendants have failed, and when Jesus came, he came to be the restored image of God, and his first act after resurrection from death and decay was to tend the garden.

I heard Anishinaabe professor Shari Russell of Yellow Quill First Nation in Saskatchewan this past Friday at Tyndale. She says the image of God is not meant to be dominion, a hierarchical power over creation, but as part of a web of relationship, male and female, humanity and creation—a kinship relation, part of caring for the community of creation. Creation is not a resource to be used but a relation to be honoured, like brothers and sisters.

She reminded us, the original Greek of John 3:16 actually says "For God so loved the *cosmos*, that he sent his only Son..." That is the good news for all creatures.

We need to restore right relationships: between indigenous people and immigrants, between conservatives and liberals,

rural and urban folk, and between human beings and all creatures great and small. Our own backyards are just the beginning. I'm sure your local Christian school is teaching this. My one daughter sends a few dollars to A Rocha Canada every Christmas, because she believes that creation care is a faith priority.

Do you? It is part of restoring the image of God in our fallen humanity. It is part of resurrected life.

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! *All creation* joins to say, Alleluia. Let us remember, the Biblical vision of the resurrected Jesus is not as our own private Saviour, only focused on human souls or services in sacred buildings, and he is certainly not a World Destroyer, but in fact the Master Gardener of all creation. Mary's mistake can be our corrective, as our own health and healing is indeed caught up in the health and healing of our world.

May it be true in Kitchener that church can lead us to nature, and nature can lead to sing praise to God in church.

Prayer:

Lord:

We have misidentified you in multiple ways, yet you recognize us for who we are and you call us by name. Thank you so much that all our failures, fears, and offences are buried in death with you, and that you turn them over and around, redeeming their losses, resurrecting what is good in us. Help us to see this divine composting as a promise for all creatures great and small, and may we enthusiastically and creatively participate in the Great Restoration Project you began at Easter. Empower us for this important ministry, in an age of cynicism and resentment, make us people of hope and reconciliation.

Amen.

Heb. 13:20-22

May God, who puts all things together, makes all things whole, Who made a lasting mark through the sacrifice of Jesus, the sacrifice of blood that sealed the eternal covenant, Who led Jesus, our Great Shepherd, up and alive from the dead, Now put you together, provide you with everything you need to please him, Make us into what gives him most pleasure, by means of the sacrifice of Jesus, the Messiah. All glory to Jesus forever and always! Oh, yes, yes, yes.