

Shandon Presbyterian Church Sermons

For the Beauty of the Earth: A Theology of Creation Care

**Supposing Him to Be the Gardener**

John 20:1-18

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I'm curious if you've ever mistaken someone to be someone else. The summer before first grade — (Memories are funny, aren't they? Why do I remember this? I don't know.) — my mother and I went to purchase my first school uniform. I grew up going to Catholic school, which meant I grew up in plaid jumpers and white peter pan collars and knee socks. We went to the uniform store, on what apparently was the day that everyone else in Livonia, Michigan, also decided to go to the uniform store; it was packed full of people. I was five years old, which means I was significantly shorter than the great towering giant you see before you today.

I had turned around to covet the particular plaid of a different school. *They* got to have a thin yellow stripe as part of their navy and gray plaid; I was stuck with a thin red stripe. And when I turned back around, I saw that the line ahead of us was very long, so I tiredly reached for my mom's leg, wrapped my arms around it, and leaned my head against it, too, resting my face against the denim of her blue jeans. A heartbeat later, a voice from above gently said, "Sweetheart, you have got the wrong leg." I looked up to see the face of the leg I was holding, and it not my mother. I was wrapped around the leg of a stranger. And I — how shall I put this delicately — I freaked out. Fortunately, my actual mother was nearby and was able to resolve the situation, reassuring the startled adult and comforting the panicked child.

I've mixed up identities other times. It's not uncommon for me to look out at all of you and sometimes think I see a face from a previous congregation. And when I'm away from Columbia for a few days, I absolutely start seeing some of you in the faces of strangers around me.

We all know what it's like to mistake someone for someone else. And even still, when Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener, it seems so improbable. Because she's Mary. And he's Jesus. They have been through a lot together. He is almost certainly all she has thought of in the three days since he died. Sure, she wasn't exactly expecting to see him, but how on earth could she suppose him to be the gardener?

There's a whole branch of scholarship, relatively new, that says the Gospel of John is among the most environmentally conscious books in all of Scripture. And this line of thinking hinges on this moment of apparent confusion.

For the next few weeks, we'll be thinking about how creation care is an essential part of a life of faith. From the Garden of Eden to the River of Life in Revelation, the goodness of God's holy creation flows through the Bible. And the first instruction God gives to Adam and

Eve? The first instruction to the first humans? “Take care of this earth, and live in it like it’s your own.” It seems that over the years, we’ve forgotten that first commandment, so to speak. Back in 2007, a study reported that the group of Americans least likely to recycle were those who self-identified as Christian. We’ll think about why that might be a little later. For now, though, I want to offer some hope. That study was back in 2007. In 2017 and every year since, the same study, the Barna study that surveys church folks every year, every year since 2017, as younger generations get older and move into the demographics surveyed, *failure* to recycle has moved higher and higher and higher on the list of perceived sinful behavior. In 2007, Christians were unlikely to recycle. In 2017 and since, failure to recycle has become increasingly viewed as a serious transgression in a life of faith.

I am sure that part of the reason is that we are becoming more and more aware of how real the climate crisis is. But I also suspect that part of the reason is that our young people get this. They have never needed to be convinced that the planet is in peril. They know that it is, and so it becomes a matter of common sense that we would do everything possible to care for it. In this, as in so many other things, we do well to listen to what our young people are saying. Confirmation Sunday is a particularly good time to remember this.

The situation is serious. Critical, even. And it is incumbent upon Christians to be clear in our awareness of this and clear in our commitment to doing something about it. Our theology leaves room for no other interpretation. We’ll be talking about that more in the weeks ahead.

For now, I want to submit to you a crazy idea. What if the reason Mary supposed Jesus to be the gardener is because he was . . . doing things a gardener does? Maybe she thought he was the gardener because he was, in fact, tending to the land right around him? What might it mean if the first act of the Risen Lord was to marvel at the trees and pull up a few weeds and adjust some branches so light would shine through to lower dwelling plants? It might mean that caring for creation is far more central to faithful living than we have previously imagined.

Now, if you are sitting there thinking this is all a bit of a stretch — that Jesus was probably not planting seeds and watering plants when the women came to the tomb — Mary supposing him to be the gardener remains instructive to us.

Jesus the gardener. All those who heard John’s gospel very likely would have understood right away. Because they were good Jews who knew their scripture. And they knew that the Garden was paradise. That God planted a garden in the East, and that God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life is in the garden. We are given our instruction to till and care for the earth in the garden, where God celebrates that humans should not be alone, so we are given the gift of one another. The garden is where boundaries are set, where life is lived without shame, where rivers of water flow and the elephant and the earwig are given their names.

And when boundaries are broken and Adam and Eve are banished, that expulsion from the garden becomes the metaphor for other stories. The exile, for example. When Ancient Israel describes coming home to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, they use language of

returning to the garden: "For the Lord will comfort Zion, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her."

Jesus weeps in a garden, then is hung on the cross, strung up on dead timbers of a tree. And this, too, happens in a garden. Jesus, who said he was the way, and the truth, and the life, is on that tree. John's readers wouldn't have had this image from Revelation yet, but we do — the image of the tree of life, with leaves that are for the healing of the nations.

Whether the grime under the risen Lord's fingernails was the dust of the tomb or the dirt of the garden, whether it was one or the other or even both, we can't say for sure. What we do know is that either way, new life has always emerged from a garden. And maybe Mary supposing Jesus to be the gardener reminds us that our first vocation is to be the same.

"Till the garden," we are told in Genesis. And till, In Hebrew, can be translated cultivate the garden, care for it, dress it, work it, tend it, serve it. We've long assumed that Jesus told so many parables with agrarian imagery because he lived in an agrarian society and it was the clearest way to communicate with people. Maybe it was even more intentional than that.

He had a story about planting seeds in different types of soil. And a story about a mustard seed. He told us he was the vine and we were branches. He told stories about fig trees and spreading fertilizer around. He talked about the wheat and the weeds, the sheep and the goats, the blowing wind, harvesting fields, and paying attention to completely non-anxious birds. And then he shows up with a hat and gloves, promising us that his work of pruning and planting, of watering and weeding, of cultivating and caring, is far from over. Maybe all that is a call for us to remember — "The Lord God took [us] and put [us] in the garden to till it and keep it."

So this week? Go outside. Sit down or go for a walk in the garden that is this beautiful earth all around us. Marvel at it. Breathe in it. Pray in it. Nap in it. Revel in it. Because it is easier to protect creation when you love creation. And it's easier to love creation when you experience creation.

This week, let creation bring you to your knees. Chances are good you'll meet the gardener there.