

Christ the gardener

I've just got one thought that I want to explore with you this morning, 'She thought he was the gardener, and she was right.' There you are, that's your Easter thought to take away with you. 'She thought he was the gardener, and she was right.'

Joy was a late arrival on Easter morning. We think of Easter as a supremely happy day – the church decked with flowers, everybody crowding in with their cheeriest faces under their masks(!), outside spring getting under way with the traditional tweeting of songbirds and nodding of daffodils, children happily hunting for eggs, alleluias and white and gold and candles– we're thanking God for the joy of the Resurrection and the hope of new life, new spring, new joy.

But the descriptions in the four gospels of what was happening in the Easter garden the day the empty tomb was discovered, are anything but joyful. We get a confused picture of people in shock, confronted by something utterly beyond their comprehension. The grave of a much-loved friend has been broken open, apparently violated and robbed. Mysterious young men in white who might or might not be angels are wandering around delivering baffling messages. People are running to and fro in the early morning light, knocking on each other's doors, spreading frightening rumours, bumping into each other, trying to avoid each other.

As the day wears on we find some of them leaving town altogether, running for a safe country cottage in Emmaus, and those who do stay meet behind locked doors, too scared to go out on the streets.

Meanwhile the guards of the tomb are spreading more confusing rumours and people all over Jerusalem are beginning to whisper about the odd things that have been seen in the burial ground, and speculating as to what it might mean.

All of these memories of an event which nobody understood at the time are being filtered to us through accounts written down thirty years later, so it is no wonder that it is quite hard to make out exactly what did happen on the first Easter Day. All we can get a sense of is a small, dispirited group of Jesus' followers being caught up in something which at first sight seems utterly confusing, and only gradually sinks home as utterly wonderful.

Mary Magdalene, in John's version of the story, has done her share of scampering and rumour-spreading and panicking, but now she is exhausted. She sinks down beside the empty grave and can't find the energy to move anywhere else. It's pretty pointless sitting in a public garden staring at a hole in the ground where her best friend's body isn't, but she can't think of anything she would rather do. And when a man comes down the path and speaks to her, her intuition is numbed by tiredness and depression, and she is not alert to any sign of the unexpected.

Who is likely to be walking round a graveyard at eight o'clock in the morning? It must be the gardener. So she thinks it is the gardener, but she is wrong. Or rather, she thinks it is the gardener and she is right. Listen to how the medieval hymn-writer Philippe de Greve explores the encounter:

Mary, weep not, weep no longer,
now thy heart hath gained its goal;
here, in truth, the Gardener standeth,
but the Gardener of thy soul,
who within thy spirit's garden,
by his love hath made thee whole.

All unawares, joy is creeping up on Mary Magdalene, as joy is waiting to be taken hold of by everyone who hears the Easter message and meets the risen Saviour.

The gardener of your soul is waiting to speak to you this morning; each one of you who is listening to his voice will leave church today with the same gift of joy. Jesus the gardener offers himself to transform you and bring you back to life. But what does it mean to call Jesus the gardener of my soul? He is planting you where he wants you, growing new shoots, pruning you back, watering you, tending to you, helping you flourish and flower and grow fruit.

In prayer today you may you be rooted and grounded in his love. The love that meant he died for you and he rose for you. May you be a joyful plant!

She thought he was the gardener. And she was right.