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John 20:1-18
Easter Sunrise

Delivered in the Sarah P. Duke Gardens

Learning to Let Go

Welcome to the garden. This is the dawn of a new creation. This garden is a place full of hope and possibility, a place where life abounds. John opens his account of the Easter scene by saying, “they arrived at the tomb while it was still dark.” Not to worry, those early disciples couldn’t see anything either. The Easter story begins in the garden with the disciples rushing about, there is Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved, and there is Mary Magdalene, running this way and that. Easter begins in the cool fresh dew of the garden, for that is where they laid Jesus, in a garden tomb. However, it is not only Easter that begins in the garden, the whole of the Christian story begins in the garden. Way back at the beginning of Genesis there was a garden, a garden where the flowers bloomed and the birds called, a garden where the fresh dew of creation clung to the grass, a garden where all the plants and animals sang in harmony with the morning stars, and Adam and Eve walked together without shame.

You remember how the first garden scene ended. Not well. Adam and Eve were not content with being part of the story, not content with being companions with God, of simply enjoying the fruits of creation. They wanted to be at the center of it all; they wanted to be conducting the symphony. In the middle of the garden of Eden was a tree, commonly called the tree of knowledge, but knowledge in the bible is always connected to love – there is no true knowing without true loving – and so the tree may as well be called the tree of love. And Adam and Eve didn’t want to simply receive the mysteries of love as blessing and gift; they wanted to command the mystery of love. And in their effort to control love, to close their fists around it, they did the one thing they were not permitted to do. They ate the fruit from the tree of love there at the center of the garden. And that is when the story took a tragic turn; that is when fear and death entered the garden. That is when they became ashamed of their nakedness and vulnerability, when they grew selfish and tried to dictate not only one another but to the whole of creation around them. It is a tale with a beautiful beginning and a tragic end.

For at the beginning of the story of the garden of Eden Adam and Eve are satisfied, enamored with the beauty, awed by the mystery, content to be God’s friends, and to work the garden and befriend creation on God’s behalf. By the end, everything has changed. Adam and Eve are no longer full of joy they are full of fear. They no longer embrace God as friend they hide from him in shame. They no longer work together as partners, they point fingers of blame at one another. A deep divide separates the man, the woman, God, and the creation itself, all have become isolated, the symphony of praise is a cacophony of chaos. After they ate of the tree of love Adam and Eve wanted to be God – and in that desire the garden of Eden was transformed from a place of flourishing possibility at the morning dawn, to a place of fear, corruption, and betrayal.

Now fast-forward to this morning. Again we are in the garden. Again we are at the dawn of a new creation, the chill air abuzz with possibility and potential, the darkness of the morning a

mere shadow against the sunrise of life. Again the story centers on a man and a woman. The woman is Mary Magdalene. She is the first to arrive at the tomb, and she alone stays when the two male disciples have come and gone. In the half-light of the dawn Mary is weeping. Her tears fall from a broken heart. In Jesus of Nazareth she was given a reason to hope and dream. She found a community of love and support, a group of friends that gave meaning and purpose to her life, who welcomed her gifts and gave her a role to play.

She does not recognize Jesus at first. She believes that his body has been stolen, a common crime of the day, and that the man before her is the only other person who would be in the garden so early in the morning, the gardener, perhaps holding a clue to who might have stolen the body of her friend. It is not until Jesus calls her name, "Mary!" does she recognize him as the good shepherd who knows his sheep by name. She rushes to him and they embrace.

This moment is where the first garden is embraced by the second garden, and where the story turns forever. Jesus says to Mary, "Do not hold on to me . . . but go to my followers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." If the story of the first garden is that of humanity's bent towards selfishness and control, the story of the second garden is learning to let go, as Mary releases her grasp on Jesus. In the first garden sin and death overcome the man and woman, surrounding them like the walls of a grave. In the second garden, even death must let go in the face of life, even sin is open-handed to the power of love. Do not hold on to me, says Jesus. Mary is the example of Easter love, which is always about learning to let go, to let go of all the weary worn out ways of the first garden, to relinquish control, to give up the desire to conduct creation's song and instead join our voices in harmony with the love that moves the stars, to give up managing God, and begin receiving God in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

In the first garden, Eve hears her name being called and she is afraid. In the second garden, Mary hears her name and she runs to the one who calls her. In the first garden Adam and Eve are so frightened in their disobedience they hide in the shadows and God has to go searching for them. In the second garden the disciples are so taken with Jesus' forgiveness they rush towards the empty tomb. In the first garden, tears of humility and tragedy are shed over humanity's sin. In the second garden tears are shed in joyful hope and possibility. In the first garden, Adam and Eve disobey. In the second garden, Mary remains faithful. In the first garden the lavish gifts of love and friendship are squandered. In the second garden the friendship between God, humanity, and the creation is restored, and pride is traded for selfless love. In the first garden Adam and Eve want to grasp the keys to life and death for themselves. In the second garden, Mary lets go so Jesus may be Lord not only for her, but for everyone, allowing this Easter love not only to satisfy her desires, but the desire of the whole cosmos.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter morning is a crossroads between these two gardens. The garden of pride or the garden of love. The garden of control, or the garden of letting go. The garden of betrayal or the garden of forgiveness. The garden of loneliness or the garden of friendship. The garden of humiliation, or the garden of joy. The garden of Adam and Eve or the garden of Jesus and Mary. The garden of sin and death, or the garden of everlasting life.

This is the dawn of a new creation. Welcome to the garden.

Which one will it be for you?