

WHERE DID HE GO?

Have you noticed on Facebook--and other social media sites--all the posts with pictures of flowers and gardens? My daughter in Boston, keeps posting pictures of daffodils, those yellow headed harbingers of spring. "I don't know about anyone else," she wrote recently Facebook post, "but every day when I go on my walk, I give thanks for all the daffodils out there." I've also gotten several e-mails telling me about how forays into the garden have helped folks stay grounded in the midst of this crisis. One parishioner, who has stayed here due to the virus, but who is used to being up north by now, sent along photos of gorgeous spring flowers and wrote: "My across-the-street neighbor in Richmond sent these photos of flowers in her garden. I can tell from the second photo that there are azaleas blooming in my front yard. There is no more beautiful place to be than Richmond in the springtime."

Recently, I took my mother for a long ride. She's been confined to the house now for about four weeks. We stayed in the car, practiced social distancing, even had a bit of lunch by the side of the road. I think she enjoyed having my undivided attention during the ride to Pine Island, but even more, she loved seeing all the flowering bushes and trees. "Oh look," she said more than once, as she pointed out bright pinks and brilliant yellows. "So lovely!"

There is little question, being surrounded by so much talk of disease and death, the beauty of a garden or a flowering shrub, can bring not only a bit of color, but also a bit of relief. A real measure of hope. That's true even here in Florida, where we are able to be in our gardens, or take outdoor walks, all year round. No wonder preachers over the years have often drawn on the blossoms of spring to illustrate their Easter sermons about new life and resurrection. And after all, that is only natural, for sometimes we forget, the story of the first Eastertakes place in a garden.

It had been an incredible week. What started out on the bright note of a seemingly triumphant entry into Jerusalem, with shouts of "Hosanna!" and waving palms, had quickly turned dark. Jesus had visited the Temple and in anger had driven out those who worked at its outer edges selling animals for sacrifice and changing Roman coins into shekels. He had gathered his closest friends for the Seder meal, and had spoken strange words, even predicting his follower would betray and desert him. He had been arrested in another garden where he had prayed through the night. He'd been dragged off, put on trial, and then condemned to be executed by crucifixion, the cruelest, most humiliating, of deaths. And then, after having been scourged, whipped and beaten, he was forced to carry his own cross beam up a long road to Golgotha.

And then he had been crucified. Nailed to the cross between two others who had displeased Rome. It was a grueling death. And his prediction came true, only one of the twelve disciples were there to bear witness. One of the twelve, along with his own mother, and some of the women, including Mary Magdalene.

Mary had followed him ever since the day he healed her. Said to have been possessed by seven demons, Mary had most certainly experienced psychosis. But Jesus was able to break through and bring her a measure of sanity, a measure of balance. His loving words, his caring touch, his healing presence, had pulled her back from the brink. And so, she followed and along with some of the other women, she helped tend to the needs of his rag-tag group.

Watching him die, watching him suffer, had been devastating. Her world had been set right by his love, but now? Now it seemed to be spinning out of control all over again! As they take down his lifeless body, she follows and watches as they lay it in a borrowed tomb, in the midst of a beautiful garden. A garden she barely notices through her tears. A garden which for Mary, is a garden of despair and grief. The sun is drawing close to the horizon, and the sabbath is near at hand, and so she, and a few of the other women, plan to return on Sunday. It is all they can do.

And then the scriptures are silent. Nothing is said about that shabbat, that Sabbath, that Friday night and Saturday. One can only imagine that for Mary and the others it must have been filled with overwhelming emotions and obsessive thoughts. Fear and grief and regret and anger--swirling through their hearts and minds. What could I have done to prevent this? What did I do to cause it? What should I have told him at the supper? And why, why did it happen at all? Why didn't the God he called abba, the God he called father, swoop down and stop it? Worn out by her tears, Mary Magdalene had fallen asleep--but a sleep filled with dreams and even nightmares. But finally, Sunday comes, and as the sun is making its way over the horizon, Mary makes her way to the garden. But when she gets there, she discovers the stone that had been rolled in front of the opening of the tomb, has been rolled back--and as she tentatively looks inside, she sees that the body is gone.

Panicked she runs back to where Peter and the others are hiding out. "They've taken his body!" she shouts. "Where did he go?" Peter throws on his mantle, and rushes out the door with John. John, breathless, arrives at the tomb first. He looks in and sees the linen that had been wrapped around his body. Peter, ever a bit braver, ventures in, and confirms what he has been told by Mary and John. The body is gone. One more tragic chapter, in a devastating story of betrayal, desertion, loss and defeat. It is just too much. They too wonder where did he go? It must have been his enemies, who have denied him this one last bit of dignity by further desecrating his body, or maybe wild animals have somehow snatched him away. With fresh anger, fresh frustration, fresh tears, they go back home.

But not Mary. She cannot move, she is devastated. Like so many folks in the midst of this corona crisis, she cannot even engage in the normal rituals of death. And now the worst insult of all. She bends over one more time, to make sure she has seen things correctly and she is startled for there are two angels there. "Why are you weeping?" they ask. She pours out her heart. They've taken his body! I need to tend to it! I need to anoint him! And I don't know where he has gone! In frustration, she turns to leave, and comes face to face with the gardener. Or so she imagines. He too asks why she is in tears. "Sir," she says, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have lain him!" (John 20:15b) She looks into his face, imploring him to help. And then he speaks her name. This stranger, this gardener, speaks her name. "Mary!" And in that moment of recognition, her eyes are opened, and she sees that it is not a gardener, it is . . . "Rabbouni!" Teacher! Jesus! "Do not hold me," he says, "Do not touch me." But I am truly here! Now go, and tell the others. And so, she does. She runs from the tomb, and rushes off and tells Peter and John and all the rest: "I have seen the Lord!" For what had been a garden of despair, has turned into the garden of hope! A garden filled with new life!

One of the gospel songs that often shows up on people's lists of favorite hymns is "In the Garden." I never really liked it very much. I always thought it was a bit saccharine. That is until I learned the story behind this old chestnut of a hymn.

C. Austin Miles was a small man in stature. He had a white mustache, often wore a flower in his lapel, and was known for his dry wit and sense of humor. He had trained as a pharmacist at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy. But later he left the trade and took up writing, editing and publishing gospel songs.

Miles hobby was photography, and so he set up his own darkroom. One day he realized that he could read by the red light that illuminated the darkroom when he was developing film. So, looking for inspiration for his gospel songs, he would often take his Bible into the darkroom, and read various passages.

One April day, Miles was in his darkroom with his Bible, and it opened up to John 20. He started to read, and later recalled that it was as if he had been in a trance. "I became a silent witness to that dramatic moment in Mary's life when she knelt before her Lord and cried 'Rabbouni!' . . . I seemed to be standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a winding path" The whole story played out before his eyes, and as he saw the disciples leave after discovering the tomb was empty, he saw Mary turn. "She saw Jesus standing there, [and]so did I. I knew it was He."

“I awakened in sunlight,” he later wrote, “gripping my Bible with my muscles tense, and nerves vibrating, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. I wrote the words as quickly as the words could be formed . . . That evening I wrote the tune.”

**I come to the garden alone
While the dew is still on the roses
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear
The Son of God discloses
And he walks with me
And he talks with me
He speaks and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing
And he walks with me
And he talks with me
And he tells me I am His own
And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known**

How appropriate it seems in these times of social distancing . . . “I come to the garden alone.” Perhaps, like so many others in these strange days, you have found comfort walking in your garden. Perhaps you have found comfort midst the beauty of the springtime flowers and shrubs. Perhaps you too have been touched like Mary Magdalene you have discovered the Holy One, and been shown that you are not alone.

But the hymn also reminds us that even when we leave such places we are not alone. For the Risen One is all around us, present in the lives of the least among us, the lonely, the grieving, the frightened, the sick and the poor.

**I'd stay in the garden with Him
'Tho the night around me be falling
But He bids me go, through the voice of woe
His voice to me is calling
And He walks with me
And He talks with me And he tells me I am His own**

And the joy we share as we tarry there
None other has ever known

You see leaving the flower lined pathways does not mean leaving God. For Easter reminds us that whether we are in a literal garden or not we are always in the presence of God. And the Risen Christ is all around us. Calling out to us even as we make our way through this current time of quarantines and self-isolation, even as we move through these days of so much disease and death. The Risen Christ calls out to us. And we need not live in a garden of despair, but rather, a garden of hope. For Christ is risen and in the end loneliness, grief, fear, disease, poverty, racism, sexism, and death will not win.

For Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Amen
John H. Danner