

into her bowl. “From there, everywhere. To and fro. High and low.” This Gardener shared the goodness of that kiss everywhere, with people of all kinds and colors in all different places. She gave the gift freely, joyfully, abundantly. Until, her bowl was finally empty. Maybe her friends were right. Maybe there wasn’t enough to share after all. So back to the garden she went, back to the plot of dirt where she had first buried the kiss in the ground, covered it up and waited in hope. “She returned and there she learned, from one kiss, [comes] endless bliss.”³ The last page of the story is covered with the glittery, sparkly, wonderful kiss that has kept on growing.

The risen Jesus’s love is something like that kiss that emerged from the tomb of the ground. His love is always growing, always enough, and always meant to be shared. The risen Christ is something like a Gardener. Like one holds onto hope when it looks like there’s only dirt around. And down in the dirt, where the seeds are buried, Jesus is moving and ministering and loving all the while. Maybe on the third day, maybe not ‘til the 300th day, that hope springs forth into tangible love. A seed turns to a shoot, which turns into a flower. Whether the plant Jesus has tended is a blazing bush filled with flowers in a manicured garden or a single dandelion in the crack of a sidewalk, let it be a symbol of Christ’s hope, which is good enough for you and for me.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

April 17, 2022

Easter Sunday

Good Enough Series: “Christ, the Gardener”

Rev. Emma Nickel

John 20:1-18

A couple of weeks ago I brought a bouquet of cut flowers home from the grocery store. My 3 year old daughter thought the flowers were beautiful. She asked if she could have a couple of flowers for herself, to put in her own vase. So I found her a small vase that she carefully filled with water. I pulled a daisy and a carnation out from the bunch to give her. She gently placed each stem in the vase and set it all on the windowsill. A few minutes later she came back to look at the flowers and asked, “Mama, when will the flowers grow?!” Her heart was filled with such hope and anticipation. Those are feelings we know well and ones we try to bring with us at Easter. But her hope was, of course, for something that we know does not happen. Cut flowers do not keep growing.

In the darkness of that early morning, when Mary made her way to the tomb in the garden, she knew that dead bodies do not rise again. Her heart was filled with compassion to care for the body of her teacher. Her heart was weighed down with grief for the death she had witnessed three days before. As yet, *her* heart was not filled with hope or anticipation. Her heart could not yet sense any joyful possibilities amid the sadness of the day.

But then, there was a surprise; a shock really! Mary found the tomb empty and was worried. She went to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. They rushed to the tomb and each of them looked inside. They believed something - that the body was gone? That the body had been stolen? But they did not yet understand that Jesus had been raised. Then the two disciples left the garden, leaving Mary behind to her tears and her questions. She bent down to peek inside the tomb one more time, just to make sure her eyes hadn’t deceived her. This time, two angels were sitting where the body had been. They didn’t provide good news, either. But when Mary stood up and turned around, someone new was there. Someone who looked a lot like a Gardener.

The book many folks in our church have been reading this season is called *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection*. Don’t let the title throw you off. The readings have spoken deeply to us about how to make

¹Kate Bowler and Jessica Ritchie, *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection* (New York: Convergent, 2022), 228.

² *Ibid*, 231.

³Amy Krause Rosenthal, *Plant a Kiss*, illustrated by Peter H. Reynolds (Harper Festival, 2015).

our way in faith through this strange season of loss and life. The authors, Kate Bowler and Jessica Ritchie, wonder about this detail of the Gardener in the Easter story. They write, “What a strange detail: the resurrected Christ is mistaken for a gardener.

Maybe it’s because he stole the gardener’s clothes, since his were stripped and gambled over.

Maybe because where Jesus was crucified was a garden. A tiny, beautiful detail that reminds us that death is never too far from new life.

Maybe Jesus looks like his dad - [his parent] - the first gardener who tended Eden barefoot.

Maybe Jesus looks like the new Adam, the head gardener for the new Eden of the new heavens and new earth.

Maybe it’s because he carries the pruning shears of a vinedresser, the careful tender of our souls, ready to pluck and plant, uproot and cut back.

Maybe he looks ready to cultivate new life, to pull us toward resurrection with his fingers digging in among the worms.

Or maybe this gardener looks like he knows something about hope - hope that Mary desperately needs.”¹

Gardening is an activity grounded in hope and trust. Can you remember as a kid planting beans in the little egg carton cups, filled with potting soil? Seems like every preschool or kindergarten enjoys that activity at some point. Do you remember racing to the windowsill of your classroom to check on them, getting to be the helper who watered the brown dirt? Then waiting, and waiting, and wondering when something would grow. Wondering just what was happening down there, hidden away under the dirt, where no one could see. Planting a seed is always an act of utter hope. We live into hope that burying a seed in the ground, hiding it away as if it were dead, is actually the way to bring it to life.

Like the hopeful child who cannot wait for the cut flowers to grow, we hold our breath and wait for the seed to sprout; for that first little green shoot to emerge. Only with a seed, we know that new life really is possible. We come with Mary to the tomb on this day. But unlike her, we have the benefit of knowing that new life really is possible for Jesus and with Jesus. *Our* hearts have hope mingled in with the grief of Good Friday. *Our* hearts have a sense that something new is beginning to grow out of a tomb where everyone thought death reigned.

Mary was mistaken about the Gardener, of course. As soon as he said her name - Mary - she knew this was actually Jesus. And then, her heart leapt with surprise and awe. The body that had been buried was alive again. As if from a seed buried in the ground, new life was springing forth.

For those who have journeyed with us throughout this Lenten season, we’ve spent a lot of time thinking about how life is filled with times of darkness; visits to the tomb, periods of grief and sorrow. Here today, we meet God in the guise of a Gardener: one who specializes in holding onto hope while the ground looks barren; keeping the faith while it seems like winter’s death will last forever. Like our authors note, maybe *Gardener* is not a mistaken identity for the risen Jesus; maybe it’s a prophetic one.²

If Jesus is our holy Gardener, I wonder what he is tending among us? What has been buried in you that Christ the Gardener has been quietly watering and is now preparing to emerge? What is Christ tending in your soul that is almost ready to bloom? What has God planted among the ashes of broken relationships, dreams deferred, and hurting hearts that for now remains hidden under the dirt, but might, one day, send up green shoots? Our Gardener is one who buries seeds, tends them, and waits. Our risen Lord is hard at work when it seems like nothing is happening. In fact, he often does his best, most important work, when it seems like dirt and deadness are all around. Our God keeps nurturing the seeds, keeps on singing to the flower beds, anticipating the time when the seeds will rise from the ground, open their petals, and bloom.

When you leave worship today, the Deacons will press a small gift into your hands. It is seed paper, in the shape of a butterfly. The butterfly is a symbol of new life, to be sure. But as we think of Christ the Gardener, it is the seeds, set right into that paper, that are our symbol of our hope today. When you plant them and while you wait for them to grow from under the dirt, remember the Gardener who tends your spirit. Think about the love that Christ shares with the garden at every stage and phase of life; especially when it seems like nothing is happening. Sense the hope Christ offers when the seed is still buried beneath the soil.

That same little girl who held such hope that the cut flowers would grow has become enamored with a picture book called *Plant a Kiss* by Amy Krause Rosenthal. The story, about another hopeful gardener, goes like this. “Little Miss planted a kiss. Sunshine, water, greet, repeat.” Then it’s “wait and wait.” The little girl didn’t give someone a kiss. Little Miss is a gardener who used a shovel to plant a kiss in the ground, and covered it up with dirt. While she waited, she felt a little doubt, and she allowed herself a little space to pout. But then, “sprout.” The kiss started to grow. A shimmering glow of gold and pink dots emerged from the ground, like a fountain. The pictures in the book are raised with texture so you can feel the glitter with your fingers and sense the love that sprang forth as the kiss began to grow. Little Miss’s friends gather around. They shout in awe, “wow.” And then wonder, “what now?” This Gardener knows what to do with the growing, glowing fountain of joy: “I’ll share.” But the other kids protest. “Don’t you dare. It’s far too rare.” They think the kiss’ love will run out; that there won’t be enough for everyone. But, “she didn’t care.” She gathered the sparkly, golden goodness