

Christus Victor, Part 7: The Gardener

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Countryside Community Church

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Easter Sunday

Do you find it as interesting as I do that when Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, he takes the form of a *gardener*? You would think that Jesus would appear as, well, Jesus! Could there be some special significance to his choosing to appear as a gardener?

If you haven't discovered by now, when it comes to Jesus, everything he does is significant. Still, if Jesus were to appear as someone else, I would not expect a gardener but a king, revealing that he is the true ruler of the world. Or perhaps Jesus would take the form of a priest, revealing that he is the supreme mediator between ourselves and God. Or, given the circumstances, one might expect to find Jesus in the form of a powerful warrior, having conquered sin and death. Why a gardener?

That's the mystery we're exploring this morning. Just as any great mystery, the first clue you come across doesn't lead directly to the mystery's resolution. That would be no fun at all, right? No, the first clue in any great mystery leads to an even deeper mystery.

The first clue we find to the Jesus-as-gardener mystery comes in the form of the painfully obvious questions Jesus asks Mary when she encounters Jesus. He asks Mary, "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?"

Now, this may seem irreverent of me, but these questions seem like the dumbest questions ever – or the most insensitive! But if you are familiar with the Gospel of John, you've heard Jesus's second question before, "Who are you looking for?" In fact, these are the very first words out of Jesus's mouth in John's gospel, right there in Chapter 1. In other words, Jesus's first words after his resurrection connect the story of Easter to the very first story of Jesus in John's gospel. This isn't mere coincidence. In John's gospel, *nothing* is coincidental!

If we go back and look at the circumstances surrounding Jesus's question at the beginning of John's gospel, we find a clue to the real significance of his question on Easter morning. And why he chose to be revealed as a gardener.

The scene in the first chapter of John's gospel unfolds someplace near the Jordan River. One day John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching him and declares, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The next day, as John stands with two of his disciples, he spots Jesus again, exclaiming, "Look, here is *the lamb of God!*"

Jesus is the Messiah and John knows it. But instead of saying, “Look, here is God’s Messiah,” he calls Jesus God’s Lamb. Jesus as a lamb is an even weirder image than Jesus as a gardener! Yet the two images seem to be connected. For, when John’s disciples fall in line behind Jesus, that’s when Jesus the Lamb asks the very question Jesus the Gardener asked Mary on Easter morning: “Who are you looking for?”

Admittedly, if you’re not familiar with the Christian story, this “clue” about Jesus being the Lamb of God doesn’t seem to help us figure out why Jesus would appear on Easter morning as a gardener. Why not a lamb? This whole lamb thing only seems to muddy the waters. Yet if you feel this way, know that you are in good company. Many Christians who do know the story, who are even familiar with the lamb imagery surrounding Jesus, miss the connection, too.

Here’s what most Christians get right: they recognize that Jesus being the “Lamb of God” is a reference to the lamb whose blood was shed during the Jewish festival of Passover in remembrance of the time when, as slaves in Egypt, they painted lamb’s blood on their doorposts so that when God’s wrath fell upon the Egyptian oppressors, the Jews would be “passed over” – and freed from slavery. At the Last Supper – a Passover Seder which we celebrated on Maundy Thursday – Jesus intentionally replaced the Passover lamb with his own body, breaking bread and telling his disciples, “This is my body which is broken for you,” and pouring wine saying, “This is the cup of the New Covenant in my blood.”

But here’s where most Christians go wrong: They assume that Jesus replacing the Passover lamb with himself means that, when it comes to those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, God’s judgment and punishment for sin “passes over” them. Yet all others who do not believe in Jesus are destined for eternal punishment in hell.

Curiously, the earliest Christians – who very much believed in Jesus as the “Lamb of God” – would have looked in horror at later Christians who construed the story in this way. The title of this Lenten series, “Christus Victor,” or “Christ, the Victor,” is a nod to the term used by theologians to describe what the earliest Christians believed about Jesus and salvation. They believed that, on the Cross, Jesus revealed God’s salvation of the *entire world*, not just believers. After all, it was not “the faithful” who shed Jesus’s blood on the Cross, but those who utterly rejected Jesus. So if God “passed over” them, surely God passes over all of us.

All of us, the early Christians maintained, are saved from God’s judgment for our sins, not just the lucky few. Not only are we saved *from* our sins, but we are saved *for* eternal life with God. Not just any form of eternal life, either. Christians believed that we are all invited to the “wedding feast of the lamb” – a feast that celebrates the marriage of Christ and Christ’s church. In other words, you and I will, on some level, be married to Jesus one day. Talk about Open and Affirming!

The message of the early Christians, therefore, was not, “If you believe in Jesus you will be saved,” but rather, “You are *already* saved! And if you believed Jesus you would already know this ... and prepare for your wedding day.”

“Behold the Lamb of God *who takes away the sin of the world*” is what John the Baptist said when he saw Jesus. And when two of John’s disciples decide to follow this Lamb, Jesus asks them the same question he asked Mary in the garden on Easter morning: “*Who are you looking for?*”

In response, the disciples exclaim, “Rabbi!” which in Hebrew means “My master.”

Funny, that’s the exact thing Mary exclaims when she finally recognizes Jesus for who he is on Easter morning. She cries out, “Rabbouni!” which in Aramaic means, “My master!”

I’m sure these connections are purely coincidental ... (Not!) Now we’re ready to put the clues together to encounter the mystery of Easter:

If Jesus is the *Lamb* of God who truly takes away the sin of the entire world without exception, then who is Jesus the *Gardener* of God?

Well, think for a moment about all of the famous gardeners in the Bible. In fact, there is only one (before Jesus!): Adam. The early church believed that Jesus was the Second Adam. In other words, he was a human being just like the rest of us, only with one distinction: he never ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil like the first Adam did. Therefore, when he looks out at the world, and at you and me, he does not distinguish between good and evil. He simply sees people who are in varying states of health – soul health.

A gardener looking at a tree whose branches are diseased does not pronounce the tree evil and worthy of punishment. He simply lops off the dead branches and provides the tree nutrients and water so that the healthy parts of the tree can grow healthier and replace the dead growth. This is how Jesus, the Gardener, looks at us. Why else do you suppose he was always talking about loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, and praying for those who abuse us? He wasn’t dividing the world into good and evil, but seeing people in varying degrees of health – and choosing to spend his time nurturing the sick, not the healthy.

Just as the First Adam is our ancestor, who was ushered out of the Garden on account of his coming into knowledge of good and evil, so Jesus the Second Adam is the one who has gone ahead of us, showing us that, in eternity, we will become like him through God’s grace.

Writes the apostle Paul, “*For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the **grace** of God and the free gift in the **grace** of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many ... just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all,*

so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:15, 18-19)

So if Jesus is the Second Adam, one might wonder if there is a Second Eve. After all, there were two of them in the Garden originally.

The Second Eve is us! At least, she is who we are destined to become. Don't you remember all those parables Jesus told about wedding feasts and bridegrooms awaiting his bride, and all that talk in the early church about the church being the "bride of Christ"? We're not yet ready to join Jesus in the Garden. We may not be condemned by God for our sin, but we're still caught up in it. Who among us, for instance, even comes close to fulfilling the basic command Jesus made to us: To love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves? And who among us has been living out Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, loving their enemies, doing good to those who hate us, praying for those who persecute us, refraining from judging others lest we be so judged? No, we've got a lot of growing up to do if we are to become the Bride of Christ.

The Good News of Easter is that we don't have to wait until we die to start the process of our transformation. When the resurrected Jesus meets up with the rest of his disciples on Easter morning, he breathes on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?" (John 20:22-23, The Message)

The Holy Spirit is our ongoing relationship with the Risen Christ that continues to refine us into the kind of Bride fit for the Bridegroom. We may not become that ideal bride by the time we leave this world, but the fact that Jesus was raised from death suggests that God has more time and relationship to work things out with us than many imagine.

Of course none of this talk about everyone being saved and everyone invited back to the Garden is ultimately believable unless Jesus was actually raised from the dead. As Paul observes, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins ... and we [who] have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

So do you believe that Jesus was raised?

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed.

Not even Christ's resurrection will clear up the mystery of why God loves us so much that God would do all this for us. But the greatest mysteries were never meant to be resolved. They are meant simply to be lived.

Happy Easter.