

The Gardener and the Groundling: The Ecology of Resurrection

William P. Brown

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

In the cosmic scheme of things it seems that Adam had a rather modest, even ignominious beginning. No “big bang” was he. Adam was fashioned from dirt, out of watered “dust.” Mineralogists would call it “clay,” whose intricate structure provided the original scaffolding for microbial life. Biologist Lynn Margulis calls it simply “slime.” Nowhere in the garden story is there mention of Adam being made in the lofty “image of God,” an image far too elevated for this down-to-earth narrative. No, in the eyes of the Yahwist, Adam was made in the image of the ground. Instead of the *imago Dei*, we have here the *imago terrae*, and that makes Adam a “groundling,” which is in fact his Hebrew name *’dm*, taken from the *’dmh* (“ground”). A child of dust is Adam, the groundling derived from the ground, just as the word “human” is derived from the Latin *humus*, the fertile, most organic layer of the soil. Adam, in short, is composed of compost.

You will not find Adam’s genesis faithfully depicted by Michelangelo, who tactfully portrays Adam and God about to touch fingers. Rather, we read of God performing something more like mouth-to-mouth resuscitation (literally mouth-to-nose). Imagine that painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel! In this garden tale, God gets tactlessly tactile with creation. We find God’s muddy hands at the potter’s wheel, working the clay and shaping flesh, and God’s mouth infusing breath and animating flesh, thereby creating “a living being,” or as the King James reads, a “living soul” (Gen 2:7). Behold the groundling! No stranger is he to God’s creation. Adam is indigenous to the ground: he emerges from it and shall return to it.

But between his genesis and his death, Adam is commissioned with an explicit task. We learn that God not only owns a potter’s wheel, but also wields a garden spade.

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east;
and there he put the *’dm* whom he had formed (Gen 2:8).

God the gardener, King of the compost, not only plants this luxuriant grove, but also transplants this groundling, Adam, with the expressed purpose to “serve it and preserve it” (2:15), a preferable translation to “till it and keep it” (NRSV). This garden requires labor: harvesting the fruit and tending the trees. Not that it was backbreaking work—this is Eden, after all—but it was work nonetheless, and Adam was put there for just such a purpose: to “serve and preserve” the garden. God the gardener, Adam the gatherer.

God’s “green thumb” is a widespread metaphor in the Bible, for God plants more than a pristine garden in Eden. God plants a people, and the exodus is, botanically speaking, a transplantation:

You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own

possession, the place, O LORD, that you made your abode, the sanctuary,
O LORD, that your hands have established (Exodus 15:16-17).

Or as we find in a psalm:

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
It sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River. (Ps 80:8-11)

Or:

I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, so that they
may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more. (1 Chron 17:9)

And even from the lips of Paul, who credits God alone with growth:

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only
God who gives the growth. (1 Cor 3:7)

God the gardener. There is nothing particularly innovative about this metaphor. The image draws from the conventional practices of ancient Near Eastern Kings, who prided themselves in their prowess both on the battlefield and in the garden plot. We have historical records of Assyrian kings who boasted not only of conquering foreign territories, of killing and deporting the conquered, but also of carefully transplanting foreign species of plants into their own gardens next to their palaces. Many a king would boast that these exotic plants fared better in his own garden than in their native habitats! Any king worth his salt could wield both the sword and the spade with equally effective results. The garden represented the kingdom. One Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, took the symbolism to heart and hung the head of his defeated enemy (the king of Elam) on a tree next to him and his wife lounging together. Gardening was a kingly thing, for every royal garden was, whether symbolically or literally, a victory garden. According to the biblical witness, Israel was God's victory garden.

Gardening is a quintessentially divine activity that no other analogy or metaphor can fully capture. Savior, deliverer, liberator, redeemer: God is all these, but such titles lack the organic connection with the earth and with a people that only the title "gardener" can fill. Verbs such as save, deliver, redeem, liberate are all "from" verbs. To save is to save *from*, to deliver *from*, to liberate *from*, to redeem *from*. Such actions involve separating or distancing the sufferer from the suffering, and appropriately so. But there is another side of divine activity, of the God who does something *with* something else. And the metaphor of "gardening" does precisely that. God the gardener works *with* the soil, with the fecundity of the ground, to bring forth new life.

It is perhaps no coincidence that Mary Magdalene took Jesus as the gardener in

John's account of the resurrection (John 20:15). Was it a mistake? Mary, the one who remains in the garden as the disciples returned to their homes disillusioned, the only one who sees the two angels inside the tomb: "Why are you weeping?" they ask. Mary then hears the same question from outside the tomb, from someone she "supposes" to be the gardener. But things are not what they seem. Although she does not immediately recognize the questioner as Jesus, Mary is clearly on her way toward acknowledging the person standing before her as divine. Mary's initial impression of Jesus is not a false one; it contains a seed of venerable truth about God's creative role in the world. It seems a bit unusual to accuse a gardener of being a body-snatcher. Or is it? Gardeners are cultivators of life; they work with the old to raise up new life, and only God can raise a body from the soil that is our flesh.

Mary's seeming mistake is no mistake, for the author of John has her testifying to the saving presence of God even before she recognizes Jesus, the resurrected One. Is not cultivation the practice of resurrection, of bringing forth new life from below from out of the ground? "How are the dead raised?" Paul asks the Corinthians and then, as is typical, answers his own question; he points out that the seed must die before it comes to life (1 Corinthians 15:35-36). Perhaps that is the best analogy for understanding the resurrection. Resurrection is organic. Consider the seed and the cedar. How more different can they be? But as different as they are, without the seed there would be no tree. New creation emerges out of the old, out of the shell of a seed, out of the organically rich soil, out of the ground of death, of refuse and decay, but all of it necessary for the emergence of new life. Resurrection is not "creation out of nothing," not *creatio ex nihilo* anymore than it was in Genesis 1:1-2. Resurrection, rather, is *creatio ex vetere*, new creation *out of* the old, new life out of our fleshy, bony, bloody, dusty, dirty selves, cultivated by the hand of God, no less. It is no coincidence, then, that Paul describes Christ's resurrection organically as "the first fruits" (1 Cor 15:20, 23). There is something boldly bodily about the resurrection. Whether in this life or the next, we have our bodies—everything that makes us who we are. As Paul claims:

It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.
If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.
Thus it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being";
the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. (1 Corinthians 15:44-45)

Without the body, according to Paul, resurrection cannot apply. Bodily resurrection is resurrection from the ground up, from the first Adam to the last Adam. The emergence of Adam, infused with the "breath of life" from God, foreshadows the new creation given in the resurrection, which itself is a rising from the ground. "To dust you shall return," God tells Adam (Gen 3:19). That "dust"—the basic constituents of our bodies, indeed of life itself—will become irreversibly dispersed throughout the earth, ultimately providing the constituents for other living bodies. Such is the cycle of life and death. As the molecules of our bodies become shared with future generations of all life, and as our own living, breathing bodies reflect the evolutionary legacy of life in all its interdependence, then resurrection cannot be limited to the raising up of human life. It must include the whole of life in its vast eschatological sweep, all from the simple fact that we remain now and forevermore inextricably tied to God's creation. Descartes was wrong. As the biologist S. J. Singer puts it: "I link,

therefore I am.” Put theologically, a doctrine of the resurrection of the dead cannot be developed strictly from a soteriological, Christological basis. Resurrection has all to do with God the creator, God the gardener.

New life, new creation is manifest in many forms, from new ways of living to plant growth to bodily resurrection. As people of faith, we recognize that creation is good, indeed “very good,” created by the living and loving God. But we are also realizing that creation is subjected to a degradation that is unprecedented in geological and human history, a degradation entirely of our own making. When Paul describes creation as “subjected to futility not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it” (Romans 8:20), I’ve long felt that Paul was not referring to God, contrary to conventional exegetical opinion. More interpreters today are considering the possibility that Paul had humanity or *’dm* in mind (see “subdue” in Gen 1:28), as manifested in Rome’s imperial fist.

In any case, creation is groaning under the crushing weight of our carbon imprints. We are the Bigfoot of the earth, the most invasive species on Earth, and we must learn to step more lightly, or creation will be irreversibly damaged. Good and groaning is God’s world, a creation that waits with eager longing for its full redemption and its full cultivation, and it is amid the goodness and the groaning that we must work to serve and preserve. Creation care is as much about celebrating resurrection from the ground up, the first fruits of God’s new creation, as it is about working with creation, like Adam in the garden. Such is the ecology of resurrection.

May we never forget how Jesus healed the blind man: “He spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes” (John 9:6). We find God once again working with dirt, this time to heal and make whole, a foretaste of God’s greatest work of all. May we never forget that the story of salvation is also the drama of dirt.

E. B. White speaks of his wife Katherine, an avid gardener, who every year without fail in the fall began to plot and to plant.

I...used to marvel at how unhesitatingly she would kneel in the dirt and begin grubbing about, garbed in a spotless cotton dress or a handsome tweed skirt and jacket. She simply refused to dress down to a garden: she moved in elegantly and walked among her flowers as she walked among her friends—nicely dressed, perfectly poised.

The only moment in the year when she actually got herself up for gardening was on the day in fall that she had selected, in advance, for the laying out of the spring bulb garden—a crucial operation, carefully charted and full of witchcraft....

Armed with a diagram and a clipboard, Katharine would get into a shabby old Brooks raincoat much too long for her, put on a little round wool hat, pull on a pair of overshoes, and proceed to the director’s chair—a folding canvas thing—that had been placed for her at the edge of the plot. There she would sit, hour after hour, in the wind and the weather, while Henry Allen produced dozens of brown paper packages of new bulbs and a basketful of old ones, ready for the intricate interment.

As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion...her

studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring,...sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.¹

So it is with God the gardener, who refuses to dress down to the garden of creation and yet grubs about in the dirt to bring forth life, who cultivates within each of us an organic sensibility and raises us to new life, like saplings bursting through the crust of concrete sidewalks, growing ever onward and upward toward the light, miraculously drawing energy from the sun and from the Son of God.

Note

1 E. B. White, "Introduction," in K. S. White, *Onward and Upward in the Garden*, ed. E. B. White (New York: New York: Farrar Straus Giroux / Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1979), xvii-xix.