

The Ecology of Resurrection

Genesis 2:4b-8; John 20:1-18

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A few words of introduction before the Gospel text is read. First, John makes clear that the resurrection takes place in a garden, and the garden is more than a backdrop. Second, John's belief in the power of the spoken word is unmistakable. Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples spans nearly five whole chapters, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that "worthy is the lamb." This is also clear toward the end of chapter 20 when Thomas has come to believe in the resurrected Jesus once he has seen and touched Jesus' wounds. Jesus responds with the searching question: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

We, my friends, have not seen. None of us can lay claim to having been present at the empty tomb. But we have heard, and we continue to hear, the ancient story passed down to us, and because of that, Jesus says, we are more blessed than the eye-witnesses! I think this also explains why Jesus does not let Mary "hold on to" him once she recognizes him. Instead, Jesus tells Mary to tell his disciples. That is, to begin to tell the story, the story of Easter, the story that draws us all into the great cloud of witnesses from then till now. But the paradox is that the story is full of seeing. Each character in the story sees something different. And so I invite you to ask yourselves what you see as you hear the story.

The first cry that pierced that early Easter morning at the garden tomb was not "Christ is risen!" but "Jesus is stolen!" Mary had every reason to believe that what she saw bore the signs of a bona fide body-snatching. And what did she see? Exhibit A: a missing stone, a gaping entrance. And for what purpose except to steal Jesus' body? So she runs to tell Simon Peter and that anonymous "other disciple," and they both run to the tomb, jostling to see who crosses the threshold first. And what did they see? The first to enter, the "other disciple," sees linen wrappings lying in the tomb. Exhibit B: And when the winded Simon Peter gets there, he sees another detail, the head cloth neatly rolled up, separated from the wrappings. Exhibit C: So far everyone has seen something different, an added detail here, another there, completing the picture of a possible crime scene . . . or the miracle of miracles.

Mary sees something more. Once the disciples have left, it is her turn to peer into the tomb, and she sees two angels in white, another detail overlooked by the two disciples, but a detail of far greater significance. "Why are you weeping?" they ask. She clings to her own reconstruction of events: a crime has been committed, and she wants to get to the bottom of it, to retrieve the body to ensure that Jesus, her executed Lord and teacher, is at least given a decent burial. But before they respond, as they do in the other gospels, Jesus himself suddenly appears. But what she sees is a gardener.

A case of mistaken identity? I'm not so sure. More likely a case of double entendre. Jesus, the gardener. My guess is that John, through the eyes of Mary, transported us back to the primordial past of the first garden, planted and cultivated

by God. God the gardener, the King of both cosmos and compost, not only plants this lush garden but also transplants this groundling of a man, Adam, with the expressed purpose to “serve it and preserve it” (2:15), a preferable translation to “till it and keep it” (NRSV). God the gardener, Adam the gatherer.

God, we see throughout the Bible, is no stranger to gardening, for God plants more than a pristine garden in Eden. God plants a people, and the exodus is, botanically speaking, viewed as 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” (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 from John: “I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower” (John 15:1). 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).

When you come to think of it, gardening is a quintessentially divine activity that no other metaphor or title can fully capture. Yes, God is Savior, deliverer, liberator, redeemer: God is all these, but such titles lack the sense of organic connection with the earth and with a people that only the title “gardener” can fill. To save is to save *from*, to deliver *from*, to liberate *from*, to redeem *from*. But in order to save, redeem, liberate, and deliver, God also works *with*, God works with the soil, with the fecundity of the ground, with body and flesh, to bring forth new life. God: creator, redeemer, sustainer . . . and gardener!

It is no coincidence, then, that Mary Magdalene took Jesus as the gardener in John’s account of the resurrection (John 20:15). Things are never what they seem in John’s gospel. Although she does not immediately recognize the questioner as Jesus, Mary is clearly on her way toward acknowledging the person standing next to 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 power to bring forth new life. Gardeners are, after all, cultivators of life; they work with the old to raise up the new, and only God can raise a body from the soil that is our flesh. Gardeners by nature are practitioners of resurrection, of bringing forth new life from below, from out of the rich, decaying, organic soil.

By recognizing Jesus as the gardener, Mary takes us back also to the creation of Adam, created out of the “dust of the ground” and animated by God’s breath. It is a striking image, so striking that even Michelangelo dared not depict it on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel: of God performing CPR, or more accurately, CPS: cardio pulmonary suscitation. Imagine that on the Sistine chapel! A very tactile picture of

God breathing into Adam's lungs and starting his heart pumping. Catherine Keller describes this as the divine Kiss with a capital K. And what God does for Jesus in resurrecting him is, I suspect, no less tactile and intimate. By recalling the first garden in his resurrection account, John invites us to imagine the resurrection in this way: God walks in the garden in the dead of night and removes the stone and enters the burial cave. God embraces Jesus' body, holding him tight, pressing flesh upon spirit and spirit upon flesh with the same hands that fashioned Adam from the dust of the ground. God bathes Jesus with life-giving breath that not only reanimates Jesus but transforms him body and soul. A resurrection, a new creation! A body devoid of decay and free of limitation yet bearing the marks of crucifixion.

Make no mistake: Mary's mistake is no mistake, for the author of John has her testifying to the saving, creative, animating, resurrecting presence of God even before she recognizes Jesus as the resurrected One. "How are the dead raised?" Paul asks, and then as is typical of Paul, he answers his own question. The Apostle points to the seed, which must die before it bursts forth with new life (1 Cor 15:35-36). Resurrection is organic, and the results are beyond measure. Without the seed there would be no cedar, no majestic redwood, no mustard bush. New creation bursts forth from the shell of a seed, out of the ground of dust and decay.

Resurrection is not "creation out of nothing." Resurrection is new creation *out of* and *with* the old creation. As Jesus' own body bears witness, the body that still bears the marks of his crucifixion, resurrection is new life created from our fleshy, bony, bloody, dusty, dirty selves. No wonder, then, that Paul describes Christ's resurrection as "the first fruits" (1 Cor 15:20, 23). There is something boldly bodily about the resurrection. "I believe in the resurrection of the body," so declares the ancient creed. Both in this life and the next, we have our bodies—everything that makes us who we are. Even our wounds.

And there's even more. Resurrection is not limited to ourselves, and the key is found in what happens to our bodies in death. "To dust you shall return," God tells Adam (Gen 3:19). In death, that "dust"—the basic constituent of our bodies, indeed of life itself—will become dispersed, ultimately providing the constituents for other living bodies. Such is the cycle of life and death. As the molecules of our decaying bodies become shared with future generations of life, and as our own living bodies reflect the broad evolutionary legacy of life in all its interdependence, then resurrection ultimately cannot be limited to the raising up of our bodies. Resurrection includes the whole of life in its vast eschatological sweep, all from the simple fact that we remain now and forevermore tied to God's creation. Resurrection has all to do with God the creator, God the gardener. Resurrection is hands down the most miraculous act of cultivation, and it is also the most basic, essential act of cultivation: the emergence of new life from out of the soil that is our flesh. In the end, resurrection is God's blue-ribbon victory garden.

E. B. White speaks of his wife Katherine, an avid gardener, who every fall without fail 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

That spring has now arrived, and resurrection is in full bloom. Jesus is risen. And so will we. And so also the world and all therein. For God so loved the world. So it is with God the gardener, who refuses to dress down to the garden of creation and yet is no stranger to dirt. God in Christ is no stranger to flesh, the soil of our existence, the soil of our souls.

So what do *you* see in the empty tomb on that dark, misty morning?

An open entrance,
strewn linens,
two angels,
a gardener,
a teacher,
our Lord and Savior,
the first fruits,
the tree of life,
the new creation,
hope for the world?

I say, all of the above.

Notes

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