

FACE OF THE GROUND

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Second Sunday of Easter, April 3, 2016

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus the Gardener Said, “Mary!”

I’d like to begin by noting a comment on what is, for me at least, a favorite facet of the resurrection story. The middle of John 20, verses 11-16, goes like this:

“But Mary [Magdalen] stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher).”

What I love about that text is the notion that she thought him to be the gardener. There’s a theological thread running through the entire Bible from the Garden of Eden on, and it is one way of viewing the purpose of the

church, the purpose of the Christ event — the incarnation, the works, the teaching, the healings, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the whole shebang — is that it is the means by which Eden can be restored. And so in a very real sense but also in a poetic sense, Christ is the gardener.

A Gardening Story at the Monastery

So, on this wintry day, in which the ground has started to refreeze, I’d like to tell you a trio of gardening stories. Sit back and relax.

The first one comes from a Canadian Baptist minister, Murray Pura. Shortly after he was ordained, the Rev. Pura found out he had a cousin whom he didn’t know existed. Here he is, a Baptist evangelical minister, and he finds out that his cousin is a Trappist monk. So he goes to visit his newfound cousin, and they visit for the day at the monastery. Late in the afternoon, realizing it’s time to leave, Pura tries to say goodbye, but his cousin, the monk, insists, “No, no, no, you have to stay for supper.”

“So I stayed and ate fresh bread, drank more milk, helped myself to that great Trappist invention, Oka cheese, had some pop, watched the young brothers eat and grin and pass bowls of salad back and forth along the long wooden trencher table, and, after another hour or two, said my goodbyes and went home quietly in joy, one last time retracing my steps

down the garden path to the front gates.

“My cousin had walked me along that garden path, alongside which there were daisies and dill and long rows of cabbage and lettuce and carrots and beets. Trappists are vegetarians, so the garden is an important resource. It is not only one of the great essentials of their physical life; it is also critical for their spiritual sustenance. In the gardens they hoe and pray; in the gardens they walk and read scripture; in the gardens they sit and meditate on God and worship.

“Speckled by rain that summer Saturday, dark and green and unfolding, I was reminded as I walked the path that Christians had kept monasteries for almost two thousand years, and on and around the grounds of those monasteries, they had grazed cattle, harvested grain, and planted gardens of flowers, vegetables, and herbs.

“The wonder was that this day, among a group of modern monks, I had taken some of that growth into me and, in their company, nourished both my body and my spirit.”

Two Authors at a Book Signing

The second story is from Diana Butler Bass. She is a modern church historian, meaning she specializes in the Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries. Also a theologian in her own right, at the time she was working on a book called *Grounded*. She was in a mall, and she came across another book signing, in addition to her own efforts, by another author, a farmer who had written a book called *Gaining Ground*.

So there’s some sort of theme going on here around the concept of “ground.” The signings are not well-attended, though. She finds that they’re down to just that author and herself.

“ ‘Slow day?’ I asked.

“ ‘Yes,’ he sighed.

“ ‘I’m an author too,’ I replied. ‘Writing books is about as tough as farming, I figure. At least book signings are.’

“He laughed.

“ ‘What’s your book about?’ I asked.

Restoring the Pastures of a Farm

“ ‘*Gaining Ground*,’ he explained, ‘is a memoir about becoming a farmer.’ Although he was raised in a seventh-generation farming family, his parents had pretty well given up farming the ancestral land. When he graduated from college, they tried to get him to earn a master’s degree and take a city job, but he felt a different calling. He returned to the farm. Over the decades, the land had become increasingly unproductive, making it difficult to earn a living from farming.

“The story recounted a journey in which he gave up using the conventional farming practices that had ‘broken’ the land and instituted those that restored the pastures to an organic and sustainable state, where he now raises grass-fed livestock.”

The conversation then moved into the spirituality of farming from this fellow’s forward-thinking perspective.

“Then he told me a story, one also recorded in *Gaining Ground*, of a cold day in February when he found himself kneeling on the ground.”

And here she quotes:

“ ‘A small swath of earth was now revealed. The soil . . . was soft and dark. I slid my fingers into the dirt, cupping a handful of earth to my nose. The aroma of the broken ground was profoundly rich, at once mysterious and inviting. In the depths of winter — with the pastures grazed low, the sycamores stark and leafless, the creek banks rimmed with ice, and the sky a gray blanket spread from mountaintop to mountaintop — here the earth abided. The soft warmth spoke to me, saying, *‘I’m waiting now, but I will be ready. We are mutual participants, you and I, intertwined.*”

The Earth Speaks to Me

“ ‘The language was as clear as if spoken aloud. It was no accident that I found myself on my knees, held there, transfixed. My ancestors knew this communication. It tapped into who they were, and who I was. We flowed together.

“ ‘The earth speaks to me,’ he said as his cadence slowed. ‘The soil, spirit, and us, it is all of a piece. We can know that, or we can ignore it. But it is real.’ ”

The third story is mine as a youth. I first had a sense of that kind of feeling back when I was a teenager. The yard in the house where I grew up was huge, with lots of trees, and being an unemployed teenager, I had to agree

with my dad when he thought it was very appropriate that I should be the one to rake the leaves. We didn’t have any kind of mechanical help whatsoever. No lawnmower, nothing mechanical. No blower, just raking.

What he did, though, is that he bought some chicken-wire fencing and made a circular pen maybe eight feet across, and he said, “Put the leaves in there.”

Well, there were far more leaves than could ever fit in that pen. Then he said, “Not to worry. When it’s full, use the hose, wet the leaves down, step over the fence, tamp them down, and then you have enough room to dump in more leaves.” So I did. I ended up putting four or five loads of leaves into that pen, each time wetting them and tamping them down to fit.

Soil Produces Leaves, Which Produce Soil

This was of course in the fall. Then winter came with a blanket of snow. But in Indiana there’s also sleet and freezing rain, and you could see the level of leaves that had been right up near the top sink down slowly throughout the winter. I never noticed it during the first year, but in subsequent years I noticed the level of rotting leaves shrink down close to the ground.

Finally, in the springtime dad would plant low-lying vine vegetables like yellow squash or zucchini or cucumbers. Then by midsummer the huge pile of dry leaves had turned into low-lying rotten leaves and then eventually into soil. My teenage mind was amazed. It was like alchemy except that, instead of base metal turning into gold, the soil followed the eternal cycle of nature that produced the tree that produced the leaves, and the leaves came back once again and produced more soil.

Three Lessons from Three Stories

Let me offer a trio of lessons based upon these three stories: a Baptist minister visiting his newfound cousin, an exchange between two authors about farming, and an observation by a teenager about the cycle of life. There are actually a bunch of lessons from these stories, but here are three that I'm offering up sort of as a starter pack.

1. **The first lesson is that our faith goes way out of its way to emphasize that God is our father and earth is our mother, and that we are both flesh and spirit.** There's a parity between spirit and flesh in who we are and in our world. Our faith — not ours alone but the world's multitude of faiths — tends to emphasize the fatherhood of God. It's in our prayers. It's in our scriptures. It is everywhere to be found, both in our religious traditions but also in many of our secular traditions as well. But we also have a mother, and that too is one of the lessons from these kinds of stories.
2. **The second lesson is that spirituality is not limited to church.** This is one lesson that perhaps I should delete from today's sermon. And that is that spirituality is emphatically to be found in many more places than just in church alone. You all know that, but much of our society doesn't realize it. Spirituality actually is something that is found in the 24-7 spectrum of our lives. It is widespread in school, on the assembly line, at the board table, on the phone, in the supermarket, in the doctor's office, on

vacation. It is part of the whole of our lives.

What the church does, and I think it actually does a superb job of this, is that it takes the diffuse spirituality that we encounter wordlessly throughout all our days, often not realizing its impact, and articulates it, helps us to focus it, and leads us to do something with this spirituality other than merely having it just lurk in the background.

3. **The third lesson is that the remedy for malaise is balance.** This is also a lesson that I probably needn't say, except that I have come to believe it over time. Feel free not to believe it if you don't want to but I'd like to throw it out there for you just to hear your reactions.

I have come to believe that the malaise of our age is rooted in patriarchy in the Taoist sense, in that there are fatherhood and motherhood; there are heaven and earth; there are warriors and nurturers. But in our societies, and not just the American society but virtually all the societies on earth, fatherhood is elevated higher than motherhood. Heaven is easily seen as sacred, where God lives, a divine kind of quality. But not earth.

It's such that certain spiritualities, the Celtic and the native American spiritualities attempt to put some balance between those two. We can easily see the warrior. The respect, the veneration given to the warrior archetype versus the nurturer archetype.

The tonic, the remedy for our age is therefore balance, to the point at which heaven is holy, a sacred place, of course, but so is earth every bit as sacred, and we all will be much less likely to treat the earth in an unkindly sort of way.

Fatherhood is wonderful, but so is motherhood. The warrior mentality, the warrior archetype is necessary in our society, but it deserves only as much respect as the archetype nurturer.

I suggest this as a lesson that can be found in the garden with the wet soil.

The Thread Leads to Christ the Gardener

It says in the text from John that Mary Magdalen supposed Jesus to be the gardener. And I commented right at the very beginning of this sermon that gardens have a long thread of symbolism. Supposing Jesus to be the gardener, concludes an extraordinarily long philosophical, Biblical, theological thread that goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. There was paradise, but things went wrong, and Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden.

From the “Song of Songs” to the Betrayal

Throughout the entire Hebrew scriptures, there’s one garden after another after another. Let me mention just one, the garden that is found in the book, *The Song of Solomon*, “The Song of Songs.” The term for it is *engedi*, and what that means is an oasis. It’s an archetypal image once again. Out there is danger. Out there is sand. Out there is desiccation, thirst. You enter into the valley, and you come across date palms and a safe place to pitch your tent and pools. It is the garden of love-making.

There are many other gardens throughout the scriptures until we come to the Garden of Gethsemane, where the betrayal takes place. And one of the gospels refers to the tomb being located in a garden area, and then finally the theological thread concludes with the Christ being supposed to be a gardener, the one to restore Eden.

A number of years ago in another sermon, I mentioned one of my most-favorite stained-glass windows that I’ve ever seen. It’s in one of the orthodox churches on Clinton Street in Binghamton.

This window is very simple. It’s about 18 inches wide and maybe three or four feet tall, and it doesn’t even have a place of prominence. It’s way off to the side of a coat rack. The window shows a mound with a cross placed on the mound. There are some clouds in the sky and foliage on the sides and in the background. At the base of the cross are two skulls, and a tiny little vine has begun to climb up the cross.

The symbolism of this beautiful piece of stained glass is that it represents Golgotha, the place of the skulls where Jesus was crucified. The tradition, the legend of it — don’t take this literally — is that this was the place where Eden was, and the two skulls are those of Adam and Eve. And the work of Christ, the Christ-consciousness entering into the world, has enabled the restoration of Eden to begin, which is represented by the little vine.

A Thousand-Year-Old Church . . .

I saw that for the first time about twenty years past, but then it was two or three years ago when I had a chance to go to Germany as part of an exchange between our sister area in Germany, the EKHN, with the New York Conference.

During a tour there, I went to see the oldest church, not in Germany but in that region. It was built during the 1,100's, for goodness' sake, and as you walk into this church, by golly, it is very, very old. Some of the woodwork is still original. It was just amazing. And as to the stonework, you could just sense the age of it as you walk around in there.

After touring this church, when it came time to leave, our group departed by a side door rather than through the main door where we had come in. I happened to be standing right near the exit so I was the first one out, and I walked out through the little doorway maybe ten more feet to get myself out of the way of everybody else leaving at the same time.

Having walked ahead a bit, I turned around and stood there gazing intently at the side of this old church from more than a millennium ago. The verticals on the door were old, old wood, but the lintel across the top was a massive piece of stone. I could tell that it had been carved, but that was more than 900 years ago, and the carving had aged seriously. All I could see was a cross. Well, duh, it's a church.

. . . Shows the Skulls of Adam and Eve

The tour guide was standing right beside me, and I asked, "What's the carving on that stone?" We walked over to it, and if you've ever seen really old tombstones, like pre-Civil War, for example, up in New England,

it's like you can't read them anymore. But you can do rubbings or you can feel them with your hand, and you may be able barely to make out what the letters are on the really old ones.

It turned out that the lintel was easy to reach. You could put your hand right up there, and you could feel it. So it had the cross, the only thing you could sort of make out, but then at the bottom of the cross were two blobs, and you could tell that there used to be carvings on the lower sides of the cross. The guide told me, "Well, it's a cross." But I persisted, "What are those two little blobs?"

He looked at me and remarked, "Those are the skulls of Adam and Eve." Then he went on to explain that there had been a little vine crawling up the cross, but that was long gone through the centuries. I was astonished! That was the same scene that I remembered from the stained-glass window in the church in Binghamton.

Articulating What We Feel

In church, we articulate what otherwise we feel. And what that said to me — that stained glass, that ancient stone from more than a thousand years ago — it said to me that, when you enter the church, what we do is to gather here to do the work of the restoration of Eden, with Christ as our head gardener, renewing the face of the ground.

Amen.