

Message for Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

John 20:1-18

I come to the garden alone,
while the dew is still on the roses;
and the voice I hear,
falling on my ear,
the Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me,
and He talks with me,
and He tells me I am His own,
and the joy we share
as we tarry there,
none other has ever known.

I have no doubt that most of us recognize this as being the first verse and chorus of the old gospel hymn, “In the Garden”. This is a very popular hymn and I know this full well from first-hand experience; in the days before the pandemic this hymn was a regularly requested favourite when I led worship services at both Allendale and the hospital. But while this is one of the most well-known and best loved gospel hymns of all time, it is also something more. While many of us don’t realize it, it is also an Easter hymn. To quote Austin Miles who wrote both the words and the music:

“One day in March 1912 ... I drew my Bible towards me; it opened at my favourite chapter, John 20.

My hands were resting on the Bible while I stared at the light blue wall. As the light faded, I seemed to be standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a gently winding path, shaded by olive branches. A woman in white, with head bowed, hand clasping her throat as if to choke back her sobs, walked slowly into the shadows. It was Mary. As she came to the tomb, upon which she had placed her hand, she bent over to look in, and hurried away.

John, in flowing robe appeared, looking at the tomb; then came Peter who entered the tomb, followed slowly by John.

As they departed Mary reappeared; leaning her head on her arm at the tomb, she wept. Turning herself, she saw Jesus standing, so did I. I knew it was He. She knelt before Him with arms out-stretched and looking into His face cried, 'Rabboni!'

I awakened in full light, gripping the Bible with muscles tense and nerves vibrating. Under the inspiration of this vision I wrote as quickly as the words could be formed, the poem exactly as it has since appeared. The same evening I wrote the music."

This is the story behind the composition of "In the Garden" and as I have already mentioned, it is just as much an Easter hymn as the ones that we would normally be singing this morning. As I thought about this hymn though, I realized something. Whether Miles realized it or not, when he wrote this hymn he focused on something very symbolic about the resurrection; namely that it occurred in a garden.

It may seem a bit odd to us but many cemeteries in the ancient world were places of both death and life. On the one hand the cemeteries were of course places where the dead were buried; on the other hand though many of them served as public gardens as well. This is because most cities in the ancient world did not have parks or wide-open spaces as we do. This being the case, many cemeteries were laid out to be places of beauty or as parks as we understand the term. They offered a quiet, beautiful, peaceful spot away from the hustle and bustle of the city streets. Yes, the cemeteries were places of the dead but at the same time, with their plants and trees, they also spoke of life. In fact, the place where Jesus was buried served this dual function. On that first Easter morning then, in that cemetery-garden, both life and death came together. With the resurrection of Jesus that place of death and endings became a place of new life and a new beginning. Indeed when we think about it, what better, more fitting and symbolic place could there have been for the resurrection to have taken place than in a garden?

We have a couple of flower gardens at the manse and they are filled with all sorts of different plants, perennials and annuals. I sometimes marvel at how

different the yard looks at different times of the year. In the summer, the gardens are so bright and colourful with such as the tiger lilies, peonies and daisies. In the fall as the other flowers have died off, there are the mums and sedum. Then comes winter and it all looks so bare and dead. But then, either in late winter or the earliest days of spring, life returns. The snowdrops are the first to peak up out of the ground. They are small and hug the ground yet while it is still so cold there they are, the first signs of spring and the new season of life yet-to-come.

Now this is what Christ and his resurrection means for us. Just as the snowdrops so-to-speak triumph over the season of cold and death proclaiming the life soon to follow, so too has Christ triumphed over death and proclaimed our own life yet to come. The tremendous promise of Easter is that Christ is risen, we are risen! As St. Paul wrote: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep" or, as a more modern translation puts it: "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead as the guarantee that those who die in him will also be raised". Perhaps this story may help illustrate this:

There was once a missionary who spent years with a tribe in a remote part of Brazil. A disease broke out that ravished the tribe and many of the people were dying. There was a medical centre not that far away but in order to get to it, the people had to cross a river. The river could easily be forded but the people were convinced that it was filled with evil spirits. There was no way that they would ever cross it!

The missionary explained that he had crossed the river in order to get to them in the first place but that had no effect. He then told the people to gather by the riverbank. He put his hand into the water. "No spirits" he said, but they weren't impressed. Then he waded out into the water and splashed some on his face, but the people still weren't convinced. Finally losing patience, he submerged himself and swam across. When he got to the other side, he stood up and raised his fist in triumph. At that sign of victory, the tribe's people cheered and crossed the river. He had proved that there weren't any evil spirits and that they had nothing

to fear. He had seemingly defeated the power of death and shown them the way to life.

Now this of course is really a story about us and the meaning of Easter. Like the tribe's people, we too fear the prospect of dying. We too want to get to the other side where life is to be found, but we are bound by our fears. How can we cross the river of death? On that first Easter however, Jesus, in a manner of speaking crossed the river, emerged on the other side and raised his fist in triumph. And because he has gone before us, we need not fear to follow. Consider this story:

A very sick man turned to his doctor as he was preparing to leave the examination room and said, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side?"

Very quietly the doctor said, "I don't know".

"You don't know? You are a Christian and you do not know?"

The doctor was holding the handle of the door and from the other side came the sound of his dog scratching and whining. When the doctor opened the door, the dog sprang into the room and jumped up on him with an eager show of gladness. Turning back to the patient, the doctor said, "Did you see my dog? He has never been in this room before. He didn't know what was inside. He knew nothing except that I, his master was here, and when the door opened, he sprang in without fear. I know little of what is on the other side of death, but I do know one thing ... I know my Master is there and that is enough."

What lies on the other side? What happens when we have run our earthly course? None of us really know. What we do know however is that our Master is there and that is enough. And this is what we celebrate on this, our most triumphant holy day. Christ is risen, we are risen! We need not fear the grave, and we shall be with our loved ones forevermore in a mode of existence that we can barely even begin to imagine. In the end all shall be well, and this is all

because of what happened on that very first Easter morning, in the garden.
Thanks be to God!