

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year A
4/16/17 • Easter Day
John 20:1-18

Our story, yours and mine, begins in a garden. Some place in the East, we're told, East of Eden. A river flows out of Eden watering the garden. Every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food grows there. And, in the midst of the garden, the tree of life – and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Now, from the dust of the ground God forms a man and places him in the garden. And then, seeing that the man is alone, God takes a part of the man and makes a woman. A companion, a partner, a lover, a friend. God creates the human beings to be in relationship.

And it all feels like bliss. Until the snake shows up and tells the man and the woman they're missing out. There's a hole in their bliss. FoMo (that means.....it's a neurosis I suffer from!) their bliss will only be complete if they can be like God, judging between good and evil, just like God.

Well, you know the rest of the story. It's all downhill after that first bite, that bite that brings with it the dawning of human consciousness, the beginning of man and women's **seeing** of who they really are. Maybe that first bite is a necessary part of what it means to be human. Because now the man and the woman **see** that they have choices. And of course the foundational choice, the ultimate choice, is the choice they – and we – are now free to make. The choice for Love. Or not. They're now free. And they also now see that freedom carries with it responsibility. That's why, in medieval Catholic Theology this moment is referred to as “the *felix culpa*” the happy fault.”

It's the moment of clarity. Of recognition. And it's the beginning of the human journey out of Eden and on to the heart of God. It's the beginning of the journey away from selfishness and self-centeredness – after all, that's exactly what the story of the snake and the tree and the apple are all about – selfishness. It's the beginning of the journey away from selfishness and on towards Love.

And now let's consider another story. The one we read a minute ago. It's also taking place in a garden. Early in the morning. Before daybreak. And at the heart of this story, just as at the heart of the other garden story, is a woman. Mary Magdalene, perhaps Jesus of Nazareth's closest and dearest friend.

On Wednesday evening, a number of us gathered in the Great Hall to watch the Berlin Philharmonic and the Berlin Radio Chorus' production of Bach's St. Matthew Passion. It was extraordinary. The chorale and the soloists brought the words of St. Matthew's Passion Narrative and Bach's sublime music to transcendent life. Among the most compelling pieces of

the performance is the portrayal of Mary Magdalene and Jesus' friendship. It's at the heart of the story and makes beautifully clear Jesus' humanity. Mary Magdalene has such love and devotion for her teacher and dearest friend, and her grief over his arrest and trial and finally his death make clear the depth of her love. And that love is so beautifully returned by Jesus. He is holding her in her grief and walking with her in her grief in the most deeply human – and the most powerfully divine – sort of way.

And so we join her in the garden, we join her in the midst of her deeply human grief. Now, in the midst of her grief, Mary has found something strange. At the tomb in the garden, the stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. As she's standing there with tears running down her face – “Where have they taken him? What's going on?” – yet another strange occurrence. Two angels are loitering around. And they talk! “Why are you weeping, woman?” “Because they've taken my Lord and I don't know where they've laid him.” She then turns and another figure is standing there. A figure she first thinks is the gardener. He asks the same question. “Why are you weeping?”, “What are you looking for?” And that brings the moment of recognition. “Mary,” the gardener says. And in an instant, she recognizes him. It's when he calls her name, “Mary.” Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus doesn't respond to her request for interaction, “Where have they taken him?” He doesn't say, “Oh Mary, don't you recognize me, I'm right here.” That would be information. Instead, he simply speaks her name. In hearing Jesus speak her name, she **experiences** his presence. She doesn't get information. She gets the **experience** of relationship.

You know, you could almost draw a straight line from the story of Adam and Eve in the garden to the story of Mary and the Risen Jesus in another garden. In their own way, they are each Creation stories. And they are both stories about **seeing** and about clarity. For Adam and Eve, the moment of clarity comes when they realize their nakedness. When they come to the consciousness, to the clarity, that they are free to make choices. Will I choose to be in relationship or will I choose to be selfish? Will I choose to Love... or not? Their story, which is of course our story, is the story of that human search to get back to the Garden. Back to that deep and full connection to the Source of Life. That relationship to Love.

And that is what Mary is searching for, that connection to the Source of Life. That relationship is Love. And she has her own moment of clarity, her own coming to consciousness, when Jesus speaks her name “Mary.” In an instant she gets it. She can now see. And she chooses relationship. She chooses Love.

Remember I said a minute ago that these are also both Creation stories? Adam and Eve, that's pretty obvious. But what about this second garden story? The clue is in what Jesus tells Mary to do. Notice that he doesn't say, “Go to my brothers and tell them I've risen from the dead and that I'll be right along to find them.” No, He says something different. He says, “Tell them I am ascending to my Father and your Father. To my God and your God.” Jesus' return to

his Father gives birth to a new community of relationships – the community of the ones who believe in him and trust in him and will act in the world in his name. You see, the love of God that Jesus embodies and that Mary Magdalene so deeply connects with is the Source of Life. So when Jesus says, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God,” he’s telling Mary and the others and all who will gather in his name and be in relationship with each other in his name that they have a new life. Something new has been born. The believing community, the ones gathered in his Name, now know God as Jesus knows God. The intimacy of Jesus relationship with God becomes the intimacy with which the community can know God. And that’s something new. Something fresh and real and vital and important has been born.

And that’s us. Here today in this wet and wonderful and cool and beautifully and colorfully alive Garden in the Northwest. This community gathers on this day in Jesus name. **This** community gathers on **this** day in Jesus’ name. This community that knows and trusts and acts in the name of Jesus’ Father and our Father. Of Jesus’ God and our God.

Some of you are here today, perhaps for the first time since Christmas or the first time period. We’re so glad you’re here, whether it’s for the first time or the 500th time. Because, even if it’s deep in your subconscious, you, like the rest of us, are really here to find your way back to the Garden. You came out of the Garden, yes, you did. You came to consciousness and you know you have choices to make. The choice to be selfish or not. The choice to Love or not. And your presence here means that at least for this day, you are choosing Love. You are choosing relationship over selfishness. And there Jesus is, pointing the way. Pointing the way out of despair and self-centeredness. Pointing the way onward to Love. Pointing the Way, that is to say, back to the Garden.

So, are you going to follow him? There’s the choice. Will you follow Jesus back to the Garden? “Come on. Think about yourself. Take care of yourself. No one else will.” Mighty seductive. But just remember, that’s the voice that leads away from the Garden. That voice leads to someplace pretty dark. But following Jesus leads away from the dark and out into the Light. Following Jesus leads back to the Garden. Your choice. Amen.