

John 20:1-18
A Time to Grow: Easter
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When I was a child, on Memorial Day weekend, there was a strawberry festival in Quincy, Illinois, where we lived. It was the best weekend of the year as far as I was concerned. Strawberries have always been one of my favorite things to eat. And, on Memorial Day weekend in Illinois, strawberries are generally at their finest. On the vine, they actually smell like strawberries; they are a deep red and they aren't too firm and not too soft. They are perfect.

Part of the fun of the strawberry festival was going into the strawberry patches to pick fruit. We could take baskets or bags and pick as many strawberries as we wanted to. I am sure the number of strawberries I ate equaled or exceeded the number that landed in the basket. I loved being there in the strawberry patch. I loved the smell of the dirt mixing with the smell of the strawberries. I loved hearing the adults talk about what a great harvest there was that year, as the weather had been perfect or how the strawberries had endured despite the weather's lack of cooperation.

The farmer who grew the strawberries milled about, chatting with all the visitors, but he always paid special attention to the children. He had what seemed like hundreds of stories about life on the farm, from coyotes to locusts and everything in between; he had seen it all. It was clear he was doing what he loved and loved what he was doing. By the end of the day, all of us wanted to be farmers when we grew up. I even had a pair of overalls at one point in my childhood. When we were done picking, our berries would be weighed, and Grandpa would pay for them. The farmer would always tell us what great fruit pickers we were and would remind all of the young farmers in training that he would need our help in the fall when it came time to pick apples.

The other part of the fun that weekend was the eating of all things strawberry. There were strawberry pies, jams, salads, strawberries dipped in chocolate, and strawberries over shortcakes and ice cream. It was a strawberry lover's paradise! We would gather around tables, sampling all things strawberry and talking about which strawberry-laden concoction we liked the best. I was always partial to the homemade strawberry ice cream that we could watch being made right in front of us. It was the best kind of feast...everything was dessert!

Across cultures and around the world, feasting is frequently associated with celebrations. In our family, if somebody did well on a test, they would pick what was for dinner, and we would use fancy glasses and toast to that person's academic prowess. Human beings do a lot of celebrating around tables...picnic tables, family dinner tables, favorite restaurants, and children's tea party tables are all perfect places for a feast. We love a good feast here at church as well. Potlucks have been a

beloved part of most churches for a long time, so much so that orange fluff and cheesy potatoes have become iconic. Our youth groups love their pizza, and we love our coffee hour with donuts and cookies before worship.

At the center of our tradition, though, is communion. Unfortunately, complex communion theology has made the very thing that ought to bring Christians together the thing that very often divides us. That's why I am convinced that communion has been made too hard. In some churches, only certain people can prepare and serve communion; some people can take communion, and others cannot. I respect these other traditions, but it all seems very cumbersome. Gathering to celebrate ought to be easy. Here at DCC, we gather around a table, we remember Jesus, who taught his followers to love each other and to make space for their neighbors, and we eat. Everyone eats. That's it. Everyone is invited, and everyone, young and old, members and visitors, Christians and not, eats.

In her book, *A Time to Grow: Lenten Lessons from the Garden to the Table*, minister and author, Kara Eidson, writes about her church's tradition and her own journey as it pertained to including everyone at the communion table. She wrote that when she was in seminary, she understood very well the theological reasons her tradition serves communion to people of all ages. But she personally struggled because it was difficult for her, as a seminarian who studies this stuff and as a grown-up raised in the church, to understand the full meaning of communion. Because of this, she wondered how we can expect a child to understand.

As she was sorting it out, she asked this question of a mentor who said it very well, "There is no way a three-year-old can grasp what Communion means. She can't comprehend the powerful significance we give to the bread and the cup...But you know what every child will understand? She will understand if she has been left out."

We all understand how it feels to be left out, some of us more than others. Some people are left out because of their age. Some people are left out because of the color of their skin, others because of who they love or their gender identity or expression. Some people are left out because they don't have much money or because they have different abilities. Some people are left out because they believe different things about God or don't believe in a god or gods at all. The world is full of places and situations in which some people are excluded.

If the Church, which came to be as Jesus' followers learned how to live in community, if it is nothing else, it must be the place where everyone is included and where there is enough for everyone. If it is not that place, then it cannot claim to be about the ways of Jesus. In the stories of Jesus, we see him teaching his followers about radical inclusion and over-the-top abundance. When Jesus was around, there was enough bread and fish to feed thousands. There was plenty of wine at the wedding. It seemed that everywhere he went, there was a feast, and there was always enough for

everyone...women and men, Jewish and not, tax collectors and priests. Everyone ate...nobody was sent away hungry.

This message, his message that there was enough for everyone, wasn't just about food. It was also about Love. There is enough Love for everyone, too...for a Samaritan woman at the well, for both sons and the father in the prodigal son story, for Mary and Martha, for people in need of healing, and for followers who watched and listened and still very often didn't have a clue what Jesus was really talking about.

And that is where we find some of Jesus' followers this morning in the Gospel of John's resurrection story that Rev. Hubbard read for us. Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb very early that morning. She didn't bring anything with her, so it's possible she went just to be close to the part of Jesus that was still there. It was early and still dark. Darkness can make everything seem a little scary, so it's easy to understand why, when Mary approached the tomb and saw that the stone had been moved, she didn't hang around there by herself. She didn't go into the tomb or do any investigating; she ran to get Peter and the beloved disciple.

First, I love that the storyteller included Peter in this story. The last time Peter appeared in this gospel's story, he denied he knew Jesus...three times, just like Jesus said he would. Peter's inclusion reminds us that Jesus' message was and is for all of us, even the ones who make big mistakes and really bad choices. And I think that is very good news for pretty much everyone I know, include myself.

The beloved disciple shows up in the Gospel of John's story but is never named. Scholars have a lot of theories about why that is, and one of them is that this disciple was unnamed because she was a woman. I would love that. So much. Experts in Greek, the original language of the New Testament, are divided. But for sure, the fact that this disciple wasn't named allows us to focus on what was probably most important to the storyteller, and that is the disciple's very close relationship to Jesus. And because of that relationship, throughout this gospel narrative, the author treats the beloved disciple as the authority on the Jesus story. So naturally, he (or she) must be a witness to the empty tomb.

When Mary reached the other two disciples, even though she hadn't been inside the tomb, she reported that Jesus' body was gone; it had been taken. There could be no other explanation for the rolled-away stone. The beloved disciple ran ahead of Mary and Peter, poked their head inside the tomb, and saw the cloths Jesus' body had been wrapped in, but did not see Jesus' body. And, like Mary, did not go in.

When Peter arrived, he immediately went in. I love Peter. I can imagine him rolling his eyes at Mary and the beloved disciple as he brushed past them to go in. He could be a bit of a bull in a china shop, but he got stuff done. I don't know what Peter thought about as he ran to the tomb. Jesus' death rocked the disciples' world, but I imagine for

Peter, in addition to the anger and sadness they all felt, his grief had a big dose of guilt mixed in. I imagine the idea of his friend's body being stolen was like salt into a gaping wound for him especially. After Peter went into the tomb, the beloved disciple went in, and the text tells us that when he did, he believed. To be clear, he believed Mary. The body was indeed gone. Having seen what they came to see, the two disciples went home.

When the other two got out of the way...I mean, went home, the good stuff happened. Mary encountered two angels in the tomb who asked her why she was crying. Clearly, they knew something she didn't, or they wouldn't have asked why she was crying. I mean, to me, it seems obvious. As she finished answering the angels, a man came from behind her and asked her the same question. And, of course, we, the readers of the story, know it's Jesus, but Mary doesn't. She guessed that he was the gardener, which seems a little silly to us, but she was in a garden. Since we've been using the metaphor of a garden to talk about growth, I spent some time this week reflecting on Mary confusing Jesus with the gardener.

In a way, she was right; our garden metaphor can easily be extended to include Jesus as a gardener, perhaps a master gardener. Jesus, like a gardener, spent the last three years of his life planting seeds that had taken root in the hearts of his followers. The days of Jesus himself planting were over, but through his followers, something new was growing. And we can see that's true in Mary. As soon as Jesus called Mary by name, she recognized him. And that is when she became a preacher. She ran and told the other disciples the Good News...she had found Jesus. This is why it is important to listen to women preach, you know. The seeds of hope for a different kind of world that Jesus had planted were very much alive in Mary and in all the disciples. In this gospel, Mary was the first to recognize Jesus in the world after his death and hope bloomed in her.

The gospel writers were great storytellers, the author of John especially. He was a master at metaphors, and he had a way of weaving them seamlessly into his story. In fact, the gospel writers were so good that traditional Christianity has missed the point of the Easter story. The real miracle wasn't that Jesus was physically or spiritually resurrected. The miracle was his followers recognizing that they could continue to declare the message of God's love in this world even after Jesus was killed. They realized that *they* were the resurrection and that whenever and wherever they continued his work, Jesus lived. The Easter story is a powerful metaphor for how followers of Jesus ought to see their place in the world.

You see, we have become the gardeners. We have become the planters and seed scatterers. We have become the ones who nurture the plants and wait for them to produce fruit. And while we wait, we hope. Because hope for the future, after all, is at the heart of gardening. Gardeners plant seeds expecting they will produce. This is true of all kinds of seeds. When we plant seeds of compassion, we must expect that

compassion will one day grow. When we plant seeds of love, we must expect love to grow. And when we plant seeds of hope, we expect that hope will grow.

And it is growing, but just as the seeds of flowers and vegetables start underground and begin to grow before we can see the growth, so much of the growing of hope happens before we can see anything. Hope is growing in the darkness everywhere. Sometimes, we look around at the world, and all we can see is what the seeds of hate and fear that have been planted are producing. In those moments, let us remember that the seeds of hope planted by our ancestors are blooming. They are blooming in each one of us.

Hope is blooming in you who...

Provide food for the pantry

Write letters to the editor and notes of encouragement to friends

Put your whole heart into your work

Create beauty where there used to be trash

Make music so we can sing together

Protect and care for children

Show kindness even when you're hurt

Till gardens and plant flowers

Take care of your pastors

Plant pinwheels

Love animals well

Volunteer your time

Give your money to organizations working for change...

Hope has bloomed! I don't know what the disciples did when they realized that the hope Jesus planted was alive, but I like to imagine that they did what that strawberry farmer did and what we do...I hope they feasted. I want to imagine that they gathered around a table and ate and drank and laughed and told stories and plotted and planned. I imagine that as they broke the bread and drank the wine, they felt like he was right there, cheering them on. I want to imagine that when they left that table, their bellies and their hearts were full. And the next day, like children looking forward to apple-picking season, they got up and got to work. I hope they started noticing the places where hope was alive and and I know they started planting seeds of hope everywhere else.

That, dear ones, is how we will create the world we want. We are the gardeners now... Hope has bloomed in us! Amen!