

A Time to Grow: Feast

April 17, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 28:1-10

One thing that delights me to no end, is walking into a preschool classroom. And looking around at all of the little 3- and 4-year old kiddos, zooming around without a care in the world. And one thing that you can tell, almost immediately, is which of these kids got to dress themselves that day. They are the kids whose clothes don't even *try* to match. Usually they are wearing some combination of the brightest things that they could find that day. Their shirt might be backwards. Or maybe inside-out *and* backwards. Their shoes might be on the wrong feet. They may have chosen to accessorize in truly creative ways.

And what I love most about this, is the pride with which these little kids will declare "I did it myself!"

A couple of years ago, I felt like one of these little preschool kids when I finally managed, after decades of failed attempts, to grow something in my garden, from seed, that didn't die. It was kale. Not exactly my favorite food in the world. But ohmygosh. You would've thought that I had just harvested a crop that would feed thousands of people, as excited as I was about it. I picked the leaves, washed them, cut them up, tossed them with strawberries and goat cheese and candied pecans and homemade dressing...and I never knew that something *that I don't even really like very much* could taste so good.

Because I did it! This person who kills every plant she touches *grew* something, that I later got to harvest and eat.

This morning we are finishing the series that we started way back at the season of Lent, titled "A Time to Grow," where we have been exploring the garden, and the lessons that the practice of gardening, or farming, or growing plants of any kind, have for our spiritual journeys.

And we've been having a lot of fun with gardens, exploring everything from cultivating the soil, to planning our gardens and planting with intentionality, to allowing the plants in the garden space and room to grow; we've explored necessary things that allow for growth – things like water and sunlight. We've explored the frustrating side of gardening – the fact that we cannot control things like the weather, or when natural disaster strikes. We will sometimes be met by the unexpected, and have to adjust our expectations accordingly. And last night, for those of you who joined us for our Holy Saturday service we sat in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion story and were reminded that there will be those occasional times when complete and total destruction

might hit. “Famine” seasons of life – seasons when *everything* changes and we have no earthly clue what in the world to do in the meantime.

And so today, on this Easter Sunday – this Resurrection Sunday – we are rounding it all out and exploring what is perhaps the single most fulfilling part of any gardening adventure: that time when we get to eat that which we have grown.

When all of the hard work is done: The soil is healthy. The seeds are planted. The sprouts are thinned and growing healthy. The rain and the sun are nourishing. We have successfully managed to ward off pests and disease and disaster. We have weathered the ups and the downs and the uncertainties, and at times have maybe had to pivot when things haven’t gone exactly according to plan.

And then, finally, after weeks or months of hard work – hard work tilling and planting and watering and weeding and tending and caring and maybe sometimes worrying, we get to enjoy the great feast that comes at the end of it all. A table filled with the bounty that has been so long coming.

Throughout the history of the church, Easter has been labeled as a “feast day” – as a day not just of remembering and re-telling the joyful story of the resurrection, but as a day in which we are called to *live* this joy out by celebrating. Feasting. Reenacting the boundless and limitless grace of our resurrected Lord at the dinner table, as we eat those things that remind us of new life, and new hope, and resurrection and eternity. On this feast day, we celebrate that the pain and suffering of famine and loss are behind us, and all that lies ahead is the promise of resurrection.

We celebrate that God has already done the hard work of feeding and cultivating and tending our souls. God has done the work of overcoming pain and suffering and disaster and even death itself, and so now we get to live out our lives in the joy of harvest. We get to enjoy the bountiful fruits of what God has done. And at this feast – this great banquet table – there are no limits.

In our scripture reading today, we hear once again the telling of Matthew’s version of the story of the resurrection. And I love this version of the story, because it is all about the newness; the fresh start that is beginning.

So, since Jesus was crucified, there have been quite a few things happening in the background of the story. First, a Pharisee named Joseph of Arimathea succeeds in getting Pilate to agree to letting him bury Jesus not in one of the mass graves meant for convicted criminals, but in his own personal tomb. And so he takes the body and prepares it for burial, places Jesus in the tomb, and rolls a big stone in front of the entrance.

The next day is the Sabbath. And if you will remember, Jewish people are not to do any work whatsoever on the Sabbath. It is a day for rest, and renewal; a day of celebration and appreciation. And yet, we see on this Sabbath day, when they were required *by Jewish law* to be resting, the chief priests and the Pharisees decide to get together and break the Sabbath by going to Pilate and asking him to position guards outside the tomb so that they could be sure that nobody would come and take the body and then dare to claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Gotta love the nerve of these guys. When Jesus's friends and family and followers – those who had loved him most deeply – were all taking the Sabbath day to rest and renew, and they had even delayed saying their final goodbyes until after the Sabbath, these so-called “religious leaders” were spending *their* Sabbath trying to protect their image and control the narrative of the story.

And then, our story today begins. After the sabbath, “as the first day of the week was dawning,” our scripture says. So in essence, what is past, is past. What happened days ago, happened. The pain, and the suffering, and the death, that is done. The betrayal and the madness and the confusion, that is done. The complete brokenness and hypocrisy of the religious leaders, done. The sun has gone down on Holy Week; the world has had a day to rest, and then now, on this first day of the week everything is about to start fresh. It is a new day. It is a new week. It is time to start again.

And Mary Magdalene and the other Mary decide to start their week by going to visit the tomb. They had been there, two nights ago, watching him being buried, but now they wanted to come back again, in the daylight. Maybe plant some flowers on the grave and say another final goodbye.

But as our scripture has already told us, this is a new week. A new day dawning. What's done has been done, and now is not the time to be revisiting old wounds.

And so as they approach the tomb there is a great earthquake. And an angel – shining as brightly as lightning and dressed in dazzling white – descends from heaven and pushes the stone away from the entrance of the tomb and sits on it. Never mind the guards who are stationed there to keep anyone from entering the tomb. There is absolutely nothing they can do if heaven itself decides to open it.

We are told that the guards began to shake, and then they pass out, becoming “like dead men.” I think that maybe what is most surprising here is that the women themselves did not shake or pass out or flee in terror. I'm sure they were surprised...unsettled...afraid, even. But these two strong women were able to keep their wits about them enough to hear what the angel was saying to them.

And here's what the angel said: “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.”

Then the angel invites the women into the tomb to see the place where Jesus had been laid, and then says to them “he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

And then this next part of the story I find really fascinating and delightful. The angel has just told the women that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. The women go run off to find the disciples, and to tell them that an angel had appeared to them and told them that Jesus was not dead and would soon be showing up to meet them.

But Jesus doesn't wait until Galilee to appear to the women. When the women had set off on the road to go find the disciples, excited...joyful...and more than a little bit afraid...Jesus chooses *that* moment to appear to them. *That* moment, to surprise them yet again. Because the truth was, Jesus wasn't somewhere else – hanging out at some nebulous place up in Galilee, waiting on his friends to come find him.

Jesus was here. Jesus had seen the grief of the women, as they watched him being laid in the tomb two nights ago. Jesus had seen the slump in their step that morning as they came out to the tomb again, looking for something that a tomb could not give them. Jesus had seen their faithfulness in following him even to the very end, when the rest of the disciples had fled in fear. Jesus had seen their eagerness to believe what the angel had said to them, and their fierce resilience in staring down a terrifying heavenly messenger when even the trained warriors had passed out in fear. Jesus had seen their excitement to go and spread the news that Jesus was alive – even though they didn't have one shred of proof and would probably be laughed out of town for sharing such a cockamammy story.

Jesus had seen all of it. Every flutter of their racing hearts; every tear of pain and tear of joy that they had shed; every blink of their eyes as they tried desperately to understand what was going on right in front of them. Jesus saw it. All of it.

And Jesus needed them to know that they didn't have to keep searching anymore. They didn't have to go *looking* for Jesus in some faraway Galilean town...because Jesus had found them first. Jesus found them right where they were.

And Jesus finds us, right where we are as well. We don't have to go searching to find him. No matter what our lives look like; no matter what the garden of our souls has produced. Maybe we are like the two women of the resurrection story: brave and open and eager and filled with a joy that we cannot contain. Or maybe we are a little bit more like the disciples who haven't yet made an appearance in our story because they are terrified and hiding away behind a locked door.

Maybe our gardens aren't the healthiest. Our soil might feel dry, or depleted. Maybe life is feeling too crowded and we are having trouble making space. Maybe our leaves

haven't been getting enough sunlight, or maybe we have been taken over by pests – invaders that we can't control.

The good news of the resurrection is that it doesn't matter. Jesus meets us, where we are, and somehow manages to set a feast before us, bringing things out of our gardens that we never knew were there. Jesus manages to take broken, wilted, unhealthy souls and transform them – resurrect them – bring them back to life again so that at the table of our Lord, all might have enough to eat. Jesus has overcome death – and not only his own death, but ours as well.

And so as we come today to the empty tomb, bringing whatever it is that we are carrying, may we be met on the road by our risen Lord, who sees through the messy stories of our lives to the bountiful harvest on the other side. Who sees through our seasons of famine to the feast that he is setting before us. May Jesus meet us and then send us ahead with a renewed call and purpose: to invite *everyone* to the feast. To the joy of resurrected life.

And may we run on ahead, singing songs of joyful Alleluia! Because Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.