

**UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY**

**Easter Sunday - April 11, 2004**

**Anne G. Cohen**

**John 20:1-18**

**For Our Reflection:**

The kiss of the sun for pardon  
The song of the birds for mirth  
One is nearer God's heart in a garden  
Than anywhere else on earth.  
- H. George Caspari, NY/Zurich

**Tending the Gardens of Our Ancestors**

To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget: that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.

(Alice Walker, "Fundamental Difference")

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to take twenty teenagers on a trip to Germany. While in Hasslinghausen, our host pastor had me accompany him while he performed a funeral. We came out of the church following the casket and the mourners down the lane, our umbrellas up against the rain.

As I stood watching them pray in poetic German and drop shovel loads of dirt onto the casket, I also noticed how spectacular the cemetery was. Each grave was marked carefully with an ancient headstone and a small boundary of rocks or a tiny fence. Each grave was a garden - some with small, flowering bushes - some with vines and well-weeded flower beds.

I asked Herr Pastor about it and he told me that each family cared for the garden on the plot of their ancestors. It was a family plot - with generations buried in the same place - as each dissolved into the earth - and the next was buried with them - and the garden replanted above them.

Imagine the hundreds of years - the generations of family - the garden that was literally what became of you. There was a reverence for

gardens there that I have not seen since...

Except, perhaps, at the house I bought ten years ago and still live in - with John. I purchased this home from the Meta and Otto Bubigkeit Trust. The Bubigeits were a German family who left East Berlin on the last train before The Wall went up - and came to America. They lived in this house for over thirty years - until they died - and I came along.

Seemingly nondescript that first Fall, the yards filled with native plants, cacti and succulents, some rose bushes and dying trees - I assumed it was an older person's garden - low-maintenance and rather dry since its keepers were gone.

Spring struck me dumb with awe...as irises bloomed among California poppies under the orange tree...lilies and white miniature roses blossomed next to each other...geraniums planted beneath jade plants burst out the top making it look like the jade was flowering in magenta and orange red and pure white. Every rose bush sported a different color, birds of paradise livened up the base of an ancient tree. And amazing space flowers and cacti bloomed in ways I have never seen before...

Meta's gardens are miracles. In the last two years, my mother, my gardener, has rearrange things to accommodate our imaginations, a hunger for REAL vegetables and the negligence that comes with busy lives - while preserving the tender work of thirty years - tending the gardens of our "adopted" ancestor...

Meta's gardens - and the cemetery gardens of Hasslinghausen - are the perfect setting for our Easter text:

[Mary] turned round and saw Jesus standing,  
but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" 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, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

(John 20:14-16)

This conversation happened while they were standing in the cemetery gardens - where the wealthy were buried. So, of course, someone would have paid someone else to tend the gardens of their ancestors FOR them.

Mary believed Jesus to be that gardener - perhaps because he was being attentive to the flowers or plucking a dead leaf from a vine - or just because the gardener would have been the only person to be there in that place in the cool early morning. Mary called him "Sir" - a sign of respect - perhaps because he was a man and she, a woman - or because he was a stranger - or because he was the gardener doing work that was highly regarded.

Why would she think that the gardener had removed Jesus' body? Because he was a non-family member laid in the tomb of the family of Joseph of Arimathea, thought it was a poor family's violation and took the body away? Or perhaps the gardener was a distant admirer of Jesus, knew that there was a danger of enemies violating his body and took it away for protection? Somehow, Mary thought that the gardener might have been responsible for Jesus' disappearance. And, in a way, she was right.

The gardener called her by name, "Mary!" And she responded, "Teacher!" - because in that very moment he had, again, taught her something... taught us all something: God, like Jesus, can be found tending the gardens of our ancestors. All we have to do is open our eyes and look around us.

As George Caspari said (in a greeting card - of all places):

One is nearer God's heart in a garden  
Than anywhere else on earth.

As Justine Merritt said in her poem read today:

This is the earth to which He sent His Son  
and we weep,  
for we have lost the Garden and the Son.  
Yet,  
the spider spins,  
thorns still hurt,  
birds sail into sunsets.

The garden - and Christ - are still here to be found...

And as Emily Dickenson noted:

And yet how still the landscape stands  
How nonchalant the wood  
As if resurrection  
Were nothing very odd!

The garden, the woods, the meadows are the life that comes from everything that has died before. The garden IS the resurrection and the life and our hope and the home of God.

I have discovered that not only my great grandmother, but my mother is also a poet - a private journaling kind of poet. I asked her about gardens because I happen to know that she loves them and has always created them - no matter where she lives - even on the balcony of a third-floor condominium. She shared a page of her journal with me - a page from twenty years ago - a portion of which, with her permission, I share with you:

On Leaving My Garden 1984 (Ann Appley)

I can't remember not knowing a garden  
I must have experienced gardens before I had memory  
And been allowed to grow there...

I never feel inadequate in a garden  
The plants are my friends who never tell me  
I'm doing the wrong thing  
Any contribution is appreciated and there are  
no reminders that I've fallen short  
no need for forgiveness  
All feelings are allowed  
There is no need for a consuming talent  
or motivation from discontent  
or disappointment in any result  
Failure is not on the agenda - only wonder  
Wonder from a deep source where the spirit  
lives and allows being  
Wonder at the natural order of things.

To me, that is what it means to be in the presence of God - to be accepted as I am, never found inadequate or a failure or in need of forgiveness - no fear of doing wrong... only appreciation for what I can do - and a deep wonder at the mere fact of being.

In the garden, we are all the same, humans merely being, dependent on our ancestors for our very existence, carrying on their lives within us - in our gestures and feelings, our talents and interests, our current and future children and our idiosyncracies.

As Alice Walker said:

We did not make ourselves...  
the line stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God...

Tending the gardens of our ancestors is not always easy, but it is good work, spiritual work, necessary work for the future of those to whom we will be ancestors. I close with the words of Wendell Berry:

If we will have the wisdom to survive,  
to stand like slow-growing trees  
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it...  
then a long time after we are dead  
the lives our lives prepare will live  
here...

Families will be singing in the fields.  
In their voices they will hear a music  
risen out of the ground...

Memory,  
native to this valley, will spread over it  
like a grove, and memory will grow  
into legend, legend into song, song  
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,  
the songs of its people and its birds,  
will be health and wisdom and indwelling  
light. This is no paradisaal dream.  
Its hardship is its possibility.

("Worksong: 2.A Vision", Clearing, p.31-32)

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As we dwell in possibility, let us continue together to tend the gardens  
of our ancestors. Please find a plant that just might add life to your  
garden or your balcony or window sill - and put it in a pot with some  
soil - and take it home with you this morning as a tribute to your ancestors.

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## **Bulletin**

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (unison)

When I awake, and day begins,  
waken me to Your presence;  
waken me to Your Indwelling;  
waken me to Inward sight of You,  
and speech with You,

and strength from You,  
that all my earthly walk may waken into song,  
and my spirit leap up to You all day, all ways.

+ Hymn of Celebration Jesus Christ Is Risen Today Hymnal # 240

+ Opening Prayer (unison)

Holy God of endless possibility, we have come again to the garden.  
Filled with grief and expecting only death, we are met with the quiet presence  
of delicate new life. The soft wind, the early songs of birds, the  
rustling sounds of sap-filled trees, the pale green of Spring grass - all of  
these whisper hope to our hearts. All of these whisper "Resurrection." In  
this quiet morning, fill us with peace. Renew us, empower us, give us courage  
for the hardship of daily life, for the essential work of compassion, for  
the healthy and creative response that must be made to those who cry out  
in their suffering. Strengthen us that we might be active participants in the recreation of  
this, Your created and beloved world. Holy God of endless possibility,  
present in every moment and place, we praise you with endless joy.  
Amen.

Anthem Easter Gloria M. Hayes  
Choir

**WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM**

Just Peace Reflection The Youth

Conversation with Our Children

Readings from the Judeo-Christian Tradition  
Isaiah 35:1-7, 10 and John 10:1-18

+ Easter Hymn In the Garden Hymnal # 237 v.1

Readings from our Present Times  
Resurrection Wood by Dave Richardson  
Work Song: A Vision by Wendell Berry  
Zoe and the Turtle by Alexander M. Sanders Jr.  
God is Corny by Justine Merritt

Meditation Tending the Gardens of Our Ancestors

Tending the Garden Music: Morning Has Broken CBS # 74

**WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION**

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743  
Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer  
Solo I Know That My Redeemer Liveth from Handel's Messiah

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer  
Offertory

Prayer of Dedication (unison)  
All gifts have their origin in You, O God, the source of all creative and healing energy. We rejoice when Your love finds a faint echo in our lives. We sense our destiny when Your grace moves through us to touch another. Help us to learn to be open and vulnerable to the needs of Your world and to respond with the generous spirit of Christ. Amen.

+ Commissioning Hymn Christ the Lord Is Risen Today Hymnal # 233

+ Commissioning (unison)  
Now may the courage of the early morning's dawning  
The strength of the eternal hills  
The wide open fields, the silent streams  
The beauty of flowered gardens  
The love of the family which can bring peace to the world  
The life that is Christ  
The peace of the evening's ending  
And of the midnight  
Be with you now and forever more  
Amen

+ Sung Response Hymnal # 236  
Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja, Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja,  
Halle, halle, halle - lu - ja, Halleluja, halleluja.

+ Postlude

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**WORSHIP NOTES**

Call to Worship is from Acts of Devotion by George Appleton  
Commissioning is by The Rev. Roy Burkhardt, UCC Cincinnati, Ohio