



“GARDENS OF STONE” Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

Poor, hysterical Mary. Isn't this how Mary has often been patronizingly depicted? Blinded by tears, looking for the dead rather than the living, or merely looking the other way at the wrong time... Aren't these some of the traditional reasons given why Mary didn't seem to recognize the Risen Christ? Whatever the reason, so-called good Christian folk on Easter always seemed to end up with the same conclusion: “*poor, hysterical Mary.*”

Not a very respectful way of speaking about the first Apostle of the Christian Church. That's who Mary is, you know, the first Apostle. And if one were to locate hysteria in this passage, one might look a bit earlier, to the rather convoluted description of Peter and John's mad dash to the tomb and its split decision on who actually won the race and got there first. (It's a guy thing.) But the boys have run off again and Mary remains behind.

She stands among the hard stone and cold tombs and sees a man standing there. It's Jesus Christ. She thinks it's the gardener. And she's right. She's right.



Amid the tomb, there is the gardener in this brilliant work, “Mary at the Tomb” by Deborah Nell. Among the rubble, the ruin, the devastation, there is the architect of new life. Tending to those whose lives are in ruins and who live in the midst of destruction, there is the Healer Christ. For who would tend to a garden of stone other than the messiah?

Paul Tillich tells a story gathered from the Nuremberg War-Crime Trials:

“A witness appeared who had lived for a time in a grave in a Jewish grave-yard, in Wilna, Poland. It was the only place he - and many others - could live, when in hiding after they had escaped the gas chamber. Well, in a grave nearby a young woman gave birth to a boy. The eighty-year-old gravedigger, wrapped in a linen shroud, assisted. When the new-born child uttered his first cry, the old gravedigger prayed: ‘Great God, hast Thou finally sent the Messiah to us? For who else than the Messiah Himself can be born in a grave.’”

The Christian faith was born in a grave, in a garden of stone as Mary met the gardener Christ. In a place of death, in a place of cold and crushing rock and stone, life broke through and delivered a child, born like all other children, in blood and tears, and laughter and joy, and surprises and fear and trembling. Out of a garden of deadly stone, new life was brought forth.





As Jesus approached the Holy City on the way to the Cross,



... Jesus wept over Jerusalem, perhaps envisioning that the Second Temple would be destroyed by the Romans just as the Babylonians had destroyed the First Temple hundreds of years earlier. As he predicted the destruction of the Temple to his disciples, he told them that “not one stone would be left standing on another.”

When the early Christians thought about the meaning of Christ’s resurrection, they reached back to Psalm 118 and its bold proclamation about God: “*The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*” So said Matthew about the Risen Christ. So said Luke about the Risen Christ. So said Peter about the Risen Christ.

This is a message of profound hope for us today, we whose eyes and imaginations have too often been filled with destruction and ruin. Who could forget the fall of the Berlin Wall?

The Soviet Empire was built on lies and violence, on cruelty and the conviction that might equals right. That’s what the Wall symbolized. That’s why it was so powerful for us to hear President Reagan standing next to it and imploring, “*Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this Wall!*” The fall of the Berlin Wall was caused by generations of resistance but, ultimately, it came not by leaders and diplomats, not by generals and military might, but by the hands of the people of Germany on November 9, 1989.

The Fall of the Berlin Wall represented for my generation the futility of all tyrants who cause death and seek a legacy of infamy but they do not find love and they are lost to love’s eternal life. Take a good look at this picture and together may we see, amid the broken stones or the fallen Wall, the Risen Christ, raising a garden of freedom and hope.





Sometimes when ruination comes, it doesn't bring along with it the hope of something better. Sometimes it simply crushes our hope and our spirits.



This is a picture from the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake that devastated a country that was already the most impoverished in the Western Hemisphere: Haiti. It affected 3 million people with up to 316,000 killed and the rest rendered homeless.

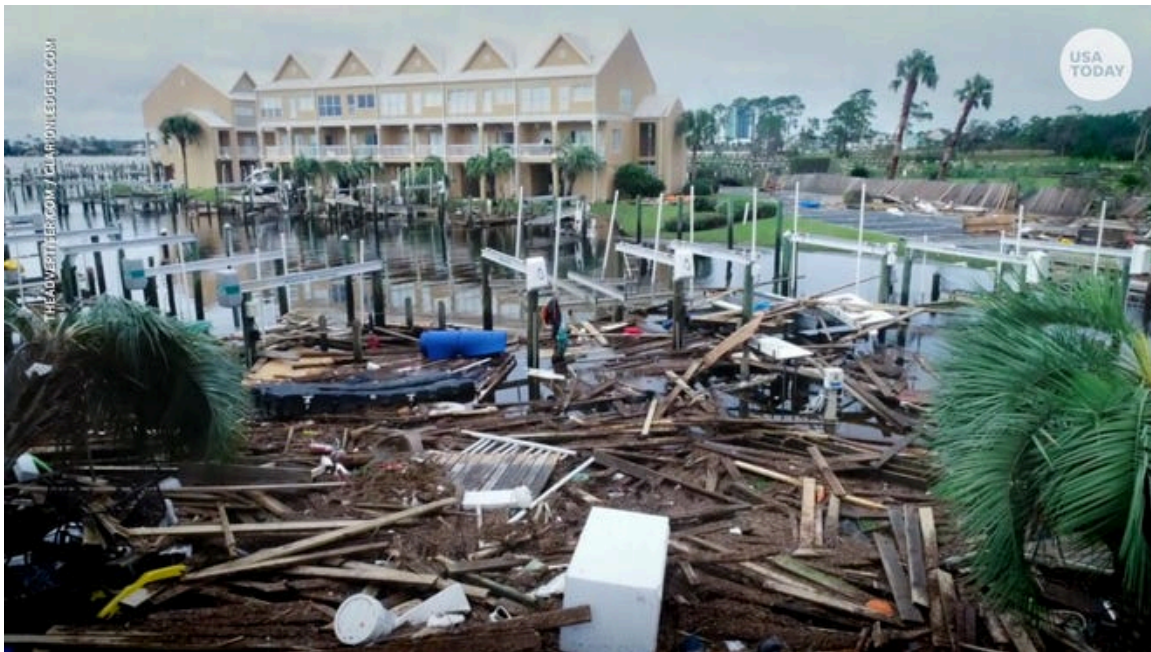
Yet think of the many, including members of the Lawrence Faculty, members and friends of our Church, and our larger ministry through the Wisconsin Conference... think of the many who have spent the last eleven years continuing to witness to the Resurrection power of Christ amid the ruins of Port-au-Prince and throughout the country of Haiti?

Here's a picture of Hurricane Katrina at its peak intensity in 2005. The damage it wrought on the Gulf Coast continues to fester in collapsing roofs, water damaged homes, and displaced people. It calls our mission teams down to Back Bay Mission in Biloxi, Mississippi once or twice every year, adults and youth, to do the gardening work of Christ.





As Dee and I spend time on the Alabama Gulf Coast during my sabbatical, I was shocked to see the lingering damage from Hurricane Sally from September of last year.



Six months later, building and repair crews have been stretched past their limits, businesses have shattered signs in front of their stores many of which have been simply shuttered, nearly half of the state parks are closed due not just to damage but to the lower investment the state of Alabama puts into public places. (Thank you, Wisconsin!) Something like \$7.3 billion of damage was caused by Sally and it was obvious to all of us down there, even to the Spring Breakers on Orange Beach who refused to wear a mask.

But the Gardener Christ was also there, blessing with a Spring resurgent, an Alabama resilient, and at least a few Spring Breakers repentant.

“Change and decay in all around I see,” the old hymn writer wrote, *“O thou who changest not, abide with me.”* We pray for the kind of faith that was born among the cold stone of that first Easter. The kind of faith that abides, that has abided through the years.

It was on a morning in 1941 when the snow was falling in New York City as E. B. White looked out his office window. It was the day after Pearl Harbor. Filled with images of death and destruction, White struggled to find hope and wrote these words: *“Who is there big enough to love the whole planet? We must find such people for the next society.”*

There is one big enough, one on whom the next society must always be built, the stone that the builders rejected who has become our chief cornerstone, one whose love was as high as the cross and as wide as the world. His place is among the ruins. And if it is Jesus’ place, then it is our place, the place of our ministry: among the gardens of stone.

That is the place of our ministry, among the ruins, the shattered stone and broken places of this world. *“In seminary, you can get all the theology and Scripture in the world, and you land in your first parish, and you find out it's you--the personality and the gifts that God gave you.”* These are the wise words of Mychal Judge, a Franciscan priest.



On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, Rev. Judge was killed while administering the last rites to a badly injured firefighter. After taking off his helmet to pray, he was hit by falling debris from the World Trade Towers.

Amid the rubble, among the ruins, beside the falling debris the work of Christ is done. When the houses of injustice crumble, when families and homes and businesses and churches and cultures topple, when disease or war, poverty or violence ruin everything the disciples of Jesus Christ must be there to do our strange gardening, to share with the survivors Immanuel, the Savior we find and follow, who often does his best work in stone.



At the conclusion of this service, we will come to the table where a harvest of grape and grain is spread to recollect our Savior, revive Christ's people, and rebuild Christ's Church. And there we will rededicate ourselves to the Gardener Christ who plants seeds of hope, seeds of compassion and love, seeds that reach skyward to create a new Eden.

- Where we are broken-hearted, where we are aching in body and spirit, that's where Christ is at work, making us strong in the broken places and ready to work alongside.
- Where we are grieving, where we are collapsing in tears and sick with sorrow, that's where Christ is at work with a healing power that reaches all the way from head to soul.
- Day by day the Gardener Christ tends to us. Where we feel adrift and confused, our institutions crumbling, and the old ways betraying us, new life comes through the cracks as Christ offers us a new covenant sealed in Christ's sacrifice, a new path of righteousness seen in Christ's loving example.
- Even where we are lying on our death beds, when the power of life seems broken without repair, Christ will give us the miraculous word of a rest that comes after tribulation, a life that comes after death, a heaven that comes after our earthly days are over.

In gardens of stone, those who follow Christ will bring forth a harvest of hope, with Christ and upon Christ, building a new and righteous garden out of the tombs and stones of this world. Perhaps it always begins at the broken places, like small green tendrils seeping through the cracks in an old sidewalk. It will continue as root and stem break through the stony injustice and indifference, reaching down and up and out to the source of our renewal. We will be revived in resurrection, no longer slaves to death, but servants of life.

May God make it so in us and through us. Amen.

Sermon preached by Reverend Steve Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
Livestreamed on Easter Sunday, April 4 at 9:30 AM