

“Brilliant Mistake”
John 20:11-15
Rev. David Hutchinson
Sunday, April 12, 2020

According to the gospel of John, Mary mistook Jesus for a gardener.

It happened after his death - - early one morning - - in a garden near the tomb.

So - - was this a case of mistaken identity?

Or was it a BRILLIANT mistake - - that revealed something true?

What I hope to show you is - - that this moment - - which is reported as a case of mistaken identity - - is really a kind of revelation - - both of God and of us. / What it reveals is BOTH something of the nature of God - - and also something about our nature as humans.

One of the most famous cases of mistaken identity happened in England between 1896 and 1907. / I think it is instructive as we look at the Bible reading today. / The case of Adolf Beck was notorious at the time - - and his wrongful conviction by mistaken identity from numerous eyewitnesses - - led to the creation of the English Court of Appeal in 1907.

What happened was this...

Adolf Beck had made lots of money abroad and returned to England in 1885 - - only to lose most of his fortune on bad business deals - - and speculative bad investments. / But he tried to keep up appearances - - dressing in a fancy coat and hat.

One day - - in 1895 a woman accused him of swindling her and stealing her jewelry. She said that he was a man named “Lord Willoughby”. / The police inspector assigned to the case found out that more than 20 women had been swindled by a man named Lord Willoughby - - in the past two years, prior to this case. / Beck was identified in a police line-up by several of the women. / But he was the ONLY one in the line-up with grey hair and a moustache.

It was assumed proven by these eyewitnesses - - that Beck was also Lord Willoughby - - a man in a fancy coat with grey hair and a moustache. Beck was charged with four felonies - - and was presumed ALSO to be the man named John Smith who had been previously convicted - - also using the name Lord Willoughby.

Though Adolf Beck was convicted and spent 5 years in prison - - he was eventually paroled after it was proven by prison records that John Smith was Jewish and had been circumcised - - whereas Beck was not. / So Beck could NOT be John Smith NOR his alias - - Lord Willoughby.

But THEN Adolf Beck was arrested a second time three years later for similar crimes - - but this time they had found the original John Smith - - who also went by the name, William Thomas, but whose TRUE identity was Wilhelm Meyer. / Eventually Meyer confessed to all the crimes - - and again Beck was set free. / In 1904 Beck was freed and pardoned by the king and given financial compensation for his wrongful conviction and prison time.

What is remarkable about the case is that DOZENS of people - - including so called eyewitnesses - - and police officers and lawyers - - were all convinced they had arrested the right man. / Their certainty - - was based on their own perception of things - - NOT on what was actually the case.

Since then cognitive psychologists such as Elizabeth Loftus have done extensive work on misinformation and eyewitness memory. / The effect of false memories - - and experiences of abuse have a significant impact on perception.

However - - sometimes this very information is used - - to discredit witnesses who may have actually testified to the truth. / So we have to be very careful...

So if we take all that as background for the scripture reading today, what do WE see?

Well artists - - through the years have been fascinated by this scene between Jesus and Mary. / John tells us that Mary supposed Jesus to be the gardener. / And artists from Rembrandt - - to little known painters - - have depicted the scene. / Mainly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - - these paintings latched on to this detail.

Artists depicted Jesus carrying gardening tools.

In a few Jesus wears a floppy gardener's hat.

Do these artists mean to suggest that Jesus was literally gardening that day?

Did John?

Did Mary?

Or is it that Jesus role is - - to plant us and grow us - - spiritually?

And what about the discarded burial clothes? / John's gospel tells us that Jesus grave clothes were in the empty tomb - - one of them was rolled up and set aside. / So did Jesus borrow gardener's clothes - - from the shed nearby?

And - - to return to my original question:

Was this scene with Mary a case of mistaken identity?

Or was at a brilliant mistake - - that revealed something true?

I would like to suggest that it is the second.

My goal is NOT to discredit Mary as a witness.

I believe she got it right.

SO - - what does it mean to say that Jesus - - IS - - the gardener?

To answer THAT question - - we have to dig into the Old Testament book of Genesis - - and then look at the end of the book of Revelation.

The Bible begins in a garden. / In fact according to the Bible - - everything - - begins in a garden. / The garden of Eden is described in the book of Genesis. / Verse 8 of chapter 3 of the book of Genesis has an evocative phrase that describes God in that garden. / According to Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve, "...heard the sound of the Lord walking in the garden in the cool of the day". / So there is God - - the gardener - - walking in the cool of the day - - as Adam and Even HIDE out - - among the trees. / Until - - the gardener calls to them!

You can almost see God in a gardener's hat with a shovel in hand.

Except that God gave the task of gardening to US humans.

Our job - - according to Genesis - - is to tend and till the garden.

So the original gardener - - asks us to join in.

Take care of this earth - - this garden - - this beautiful place...

Help things to grow - - don't abuse it.

And beware of the tree of knowledge - - because knowledge can be misused.

Just like the knowledge - - that false eyewitnesses sometimes make mistakes - - is sometimes misused - - to discredit those who are telling the truth.

People like Mary - - in the garden - - who saw a gardener.

A gardener named Jesus.

The son of God - - the original gardener.

So the Bible begins in a garden - - and the tree at the center of that garden is also there at the very END of the Bible in the book of Revelation. / Chapter 22 describes rivers near the tree - - just like in Genesis. / And the tree of knowledge is gone now - - but the tree of LIFE remains.

Could it be that there is more to this garden than an accidental setting?

Life in the garden - - is fragile - - and tenacious.

It is both - - beautiful - - and vicious.

Animals kill to survive - - and they thrive when life is in balance.

There is mass pollution - - and there are amazing sunsets.

According to Revelation - - the tree of life is for healing.

“The healing of the nations” - - is what the Bible says.

I think that is something we need a lot of right now...

And Jesus brought nothing - - if not healing.

Jesus the gardener - - tending and tilling - - our souls.

Jesus amazing love - - there for each one of us.

This scene in the garden in John’s gospel is RIGHT after - - the horror of Jesus death on a cross. / And what we learn - - is that LIFE - - triumphs over death. / What we learn is that Jesus IS there for us - - offering life and forgiveness and healing.

Make no mistake - - Mary was on to something!

There at the tomb - - she saw the eternal gardener.

SO on this Easter Sunday - - we are waiting.

We are in a holding pattern because of the Coronavirus.

And so we plan to celebrate Easter Sunday - - whenever we can gather again in person - - face to face - - not just electronically - - and distantly. / That day will come. / I do not know WHEN it will come - - but it will. / And when it does it WILL be GLORIOUS!

Meanwhile - - we wait.

And like Mary in the early morning dawn - - we wonder about this life.

Can this be Jesus - - still alive - - in our lives?

That IS the promise of Easter - - which we need now more than ever.

So remember that promise of resurrection.

Remember life stronger than death.

And wait until we can celebrate it in all its fullness sometime in the future.

You may notice that the scripture reading today - - stopped at verse 15.

That is to acknowledge that this Easter scene has been interrupted.

Easter is no hold - - in our time.

But Easter is never on hold in our hearts.

So on some Sunday to come - - read the entire story in chapter 20 of John.

All 18 verses!

And meanwhile - - live in HOPE!

Make no mistake - - God's amazing, amazing love in Jesus - - is there for us!

And that love - - helps us keep on growing - - and living.

No matter what.

That is what Mary's brilliant mistake - - reveals to us.

Mary's identification of Jesus as a gardener reveals both God and our own frailty.

Our frailty is revealed in that we ARE sometimes mistaken.

And sometimes - - when we are not - - we still don't trust our senses.

We say we believe in Jesus - - and yet we have doubt.

We think we see God at work in the world - - and then we don't.

We think it's a gardener - - or is it Jesus - - or are we just seeing things...?

So our perception - - is mysterious to say the least.

But God - - is ever present.

God has been walking in the garden since the beginning of time.

God intended to be with us in this life.

God wants us to grow - - and to live with abundance.

And we see that in Jesus more fully than anywhere else.

Jesus - - who not only died - - but who lived.

May that Jesus - - come alive in your life - - in these days.

In your life - - and in mine - - and in our world.

Amen.