

`Sermon for Easter Day 2015 (Bristol Cathedral)

Text: John 20:1-18

Words from our Gospel today: “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.”

Why, do you think, a ‘gardener’? Why does John tell us that Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for a gardener – a detail that is found in no other Gospel.

If you visit King’s College Chapel, in Cambridge, you will see one suggestion. Because the resurrection story from John’s gospel is set out in the stained glass windows there.

Mary Magdalene looks characteristically fabulous. She has a crimson tunic, and a 16th C headdress worthy of Princess Leia.

In this window, it’s perfectly clear why Mary mistook Jesus for a gardener. She mistook him for a gardener because he was wearing a sun hat, and carrying a spade.

The 18th Century Baptist theologian, John Gill, reasoned rather differently.

We know, from Matthew's gospel, he noted, that the tomb where Jesus had been laid was, Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. So the garden was presumably Joseph of Arimathea's garden as well.

But Joseph of Arimathea was a gentleman; and no gentleman would ever be up at that time of day. So, naturally enough, Mary Magdalene thought that it must have been his gardener instead. I have one or two students who take John Gill's approach to early mornings!

Now I am not sure that either of these suggestions quite gets us to the heart of the matter. And since John is not a writer who clutters his gospel with unnecessary details, this odd reference to gardening must be doing some work, and we ought to find out what.

It helps, I think, if we step back a bit, and widen our focus, so as to take in the episode as a whole.

It is the first day. We are in a garden. There is a man. And there is a woman. And the man utters the woman's name.

That rings a bell. I think we are back in the Book of Genesis.

Remember the story which we are told in Genesis, chapter 2. There too, it is the first day, and we are in a garden. The first man, Adam, encounters the first woman and says, 'She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.'

John seems to be echoing this pattern, in his account of Easter Day. And if this is right, then it is the desired resonance with Genesis 2 that explains why the Risen Jesus gets mistaken for a gardener.

Because, in Genesis 2, we are told that Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden ‘to dress it and to keep it.’ The First Adam, in other words, was a gardener. For he was the original gardener. So it is entirely appropriate that the Second Adam, Jesus, is mistaken for one.

But, as John also makes clear, Jesus is not, in fact, the gardener. The Second Adam is not just a facsimile of the First.

And that is because Jesus’s resurrection isn’t merely the restoration of the Old Creation: it is the beginning of the New. And John’s allusions to Genesis, both here and elsewhere in his account of the resurrection, are meant to underline that point.

For John, you see, the resurrection of Jesus is nothing less than the dawn of a New Creation. On Easter morning, the world is re-made.

That’s why we shouldn’t think of the resurrection as one more miracle like the others. It cannot even be likened to the times when Jesus brought people back to life, although those miracles certainly point us towards it.

Because the life of resurrection, for Jesus and for us, is a life utterly transformed. It is a life beyond death. And, as a result, it is a life without boundary and without ultimate horizon. It is a life that will lift a human being ever onwards and upwards, to constantly greater glory and blessedness.

To put it another way, the life of resurrection is also, and necessarily, the life of ascension. And that is precisely why Jesus releases himself from Mary's embrace with those odd words, 'Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.'

Because Easter Day begins the New Creation. But this New Creation is only perfected, once it is drawn fully into the love and radiance of the Father. To put it another way, the life of the resurrection can only come to rest, in an unclouded vision of God. So that is where it must tend.

But the ascension to which Easter points us, is not some bodiless, spiritual ascension; any more than the resurrection is a bodiless and spiritual resurrection. Easter points us forward to a wonderful destiny, a destiny which involves the whole of our humanity, body and soul, as we are drawn into the endless life and laughter of heaven.

The message of Easter is that everything we are has been freed from the grave. Everything we are is being transfigured by God's grace. And everything we are will be drawn at last into the presence of God.

But if Easter Day initiates this wonderful re-creation, our question must surely be: how can we step into this new world? How can we be made new, so that we can be drawn up, with Jesus, to the Father's side?

The conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene gives us the answer to that question. Because it shows us how a human being is touched and transformed by the Risen Life of Christ.

There are three moments in this encounter. There is a call; there is an embrace; and there is a task. Let's look at each in turn.

First, the call.

The reason why Mary does not identify Jesus, at first, is that she cannot properly see him.

She can see him with her physical eyes, of course. She's aware that there's someone else in the garden. But she does not recognize him.

But that changes, the moment he calls her by name. "Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Hebrew, Rabbouni; which means Teacher."

John is telling us here that we cannot know the Risen Lord, unless he opens our minds to his presence. Were he sitting in this Cathedral alongside us, not one of us would recognise him, unless he gave us the power to do so.

For the Risen Jesus is not discerned by a purely physical sight. Any more than God's Word is heard by purely physical ears. Jesus must open our eyes, and unstop our ears, before our dumb tongues are able to sing the Easter song.

It follows, of course, that participation in the life of resurrection, participation in God's New Creation, is not something we can achieve by ourselves. We cannot take hold of it. We cannot earn it. We cannot do anything that will guarantee our place within it.

Instead, the New Creation comes to us as a free gift. And it is a gift that is communicated to us in and through the call of Jesus Christ. For the New Creation, just like the Old, must be spoken into existence by God Himself.

This call comes in many forms; as many forms, in fact, as there are people to be called. With Mary, the call was both surprising and sudden. She could not see the Lord. He called her by name. And then she could. With St Paul, of course, it was the same.

For most of us, though, Jesus's call takes longer to trickle down into our minds. It can start with just the glimmer of a suspicion that there may be something to Christianity after all. But however it comes, and however long it takes for us to discern, the grace of God comes with this call, and impels us to respond.

When we speak of response, we have come to the second moment of our re-creation, the moment of embrace.

As we heard in the gospel, once Mary had recognised Jesus, she immediately through her arms around him in a passionate and potentially rather constraining embrace. Jesus has to gently prise her off him, saying, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

For Mary, of course, such a passionately physical embrace of Jesus was possible. It is not for us.

But we can, of course, embrace Jesus through faith. That is why the call of the risen Jesus, is invariably an invitation to faith. And it is only when we respond to that sacred invitation, when we choose to put our trust in Jesus for our salvation, that we step into God's New Creation; or, to put it more accurately, that God's New Creation takes root within us.

Because faith unites us with the Risen Christ with an embrace less physical, though no less intimate than Mary's. By faith, we become one with Christ. By faith we are grafted into Christ. And, as Paul underlined, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new."

The sacrament of baptism is the sign and seal of our incorporation into Christ by faith. And Confirmation is the solemn proclamation of the faith which Baptism symbolises. So there is no better day than Easter day for new disciples to be baptised and confirmed.

So God's New Creation begins with our call, and it takes root in us with faith. But it also brings us a task to perform. "Jesus said to her... 'Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your father, to my God and your God.'"

The proper fruit of the New Creation is therefore mission.

For once we have experienced the resurrection life ourselves, how can we hold it back from others? The new life which Jesus brings cannot be locked up in our hearts, any more than it could be locked up in his tomb.

For it is an exuberant, outgoing life; it is a life that yearns for others to taste and see how gracious the Lord is.

So the kind of mission that springs out of our New Creation is not simply a matter of information. It is an invitation; an invitation into relationship with God. The same relationship, indeed, that the risen Jesus enjoys. Which is why he calls God both “My Father and your Father... my God and your God.”

For the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is God and Father, too, of all who believe in His Son
. And just as God has raised his Firstborn from the dead, and lifted him to heaven; so he will free all that we are from the death of sin, and raise us, at last, to reign with the saints in light.

So to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.

