

Good Friday, March 25, 2016
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John 18:1-19:42

The gospel of Jesus' Passion, according to John, begins and ends in a garden. This mention of a place of planting, and tending, and growing, this garden motif is one of the nuances of this particular gospel, John's gospel, which we hear on this particular night. Night is when this gospel story begins, when, after sharing a last meal with his disciples, late at night, Jesus goes outside, across a valley, to pray. In John's gospel, the place where Jesus goes to pray is described, as a garden. And it is there, in the garden, that Jesus is arrested. Jesus is taken away from the garden and put on trial. He is taken away from the garden and brought into the courtyard of the high priest. Peter follows, and watches at a distance, stands outside the gate of the courtyard, where he is recognized: "Weren't you with Jesus?" a bystander asks Peter. In John's gospel, the question is framed in this way: "Did I not see you in the garden with him?"

After being brought inside, to stand before Jewish religious leaders, Jesus is brought further indoors, into the headquarters of Pilate. Pilate questions Jesus, has him flogged, and hands him over to be executed—an execution that will take place outside. They take Jesus to the Place of the Skull, a hill so named because of its geographical features. In John's gospel, Jesus carries the cross there by himself. Jesus walks across all these plots, these human plots, to a hill, with his cross, which is dropped into a hole in the earth. From the cross, Jesus tends to his followers, his mother and a beloved disciple, pruning and arranging their flourishing. Finally, he proclaims that the harvest is ready: "It is finished."

They take his body down from the cross, and make arrangements for his burial. John tells us yet more here about the landscape of the place where Jesus died. John writes, "There was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb."

We have no gardens here, now. It's still only March, and it's been so very cold. The calendar may say it is spring but I have yet to believe it. The trees are barely budding, if they are budding at all. The forecasts still taunt us with snow. I have yet to see a single crocus. But why would I? This year, Lent began when January was barely one week past.

It's too cold, it's too dark, it's too early, for gardens, for us. But not for God. The gospel, the good news, the story of God's love for us begins and ends in a garden. In Genesis, God plants a garden, Eden, and in the center of that garden there are two trees: the Tree of the Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We left Eden long ago. We've plucked and eaten all the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We've stripped that tree bare, but seem no better for the knowing. Meanwhile, the other tree, the Tree of Life, the tree that would save us from death, remained in Eden, off limits.

Until God planted another tree. God planted a tree on a hill—perhaps, as the song says, on a green hill, far away, outside a city wall. God planted a tree that has a trunk that runs true, a trunk that reaches from heaven to earth, a tree with boughs that reach out to either horizon, boughs that embrace the whole world. God planted that tree, the cross, and then climbed up on to it. And that tree became the tree of life.

The tree of life—it's here, on Good Friday, in the gospel of John. It will turn up, yet again, in the book of Revelation. The tree of life turns up again at the end the story, at the end of our story, in paradise. Revelation describes it: the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

It is still cold, it is still night here, now. Easter has not yet dawned, that Easter morning when, in John's gospel, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb, and mistakes the risen Lord for a gardener. Did she shiver when she finally knew him? Did she shiver, not with cold, but with revelation, when the light became bright and she could see him? For Mary, for the writer of John's gospel, for all who've been given a glimpse of the Paradise that God is planting for us, for followers of Jesus then and now, even on Good Friday, Easter comes early.