

The Gardener Indeed

*An Easter Sunday sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on John 20:1-18
on April 5, 2026, with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

As the story goes, in the days when the Czar ruled over Russia, he was walking in his palace garden one day. In the far corner of the garden he found a soldier who was stationed as a sentry to guard that particular place. Confused as to why a soldier would be assigned to such a location in his garden, the Czar asked the man why he was in that spot, but the soldier merely stated that he was ordered by his superior officer to be here. By that point, the Czar's curiosity was sparked. He began to follow the chain of command up through the ranks to find out why this guardian was stationed in that place in the garden. No one seemed to know anything other than orders had come down from above. Finally, the Czar discovered that over one hundred years earlier, when Catherine the Great ruled over Russia, she had planted a rose bush in that place in the garden. To protect her rose bush she stationed a soldier to stand guard over that place in the garden, and ever since, a guardian had stood tall and strong protecting that corner. The only problem, of course, was that the rose bush had long since died.¹

II.

You might feel some sympathy with old Catherine, here, because who wouldn't want to protect the tender, beautiful things in this world? That impulse has put guns in our hands, and cameras on our doorbells, and laws on our books, and walls at our borders. At our best, we humans protect out of

¹ Story as told throughout my life and his pastorate by my dad, Rev. Dr. David Hull, forming the nucleus of his best sermon, "Guardian or Gardener?"

love and a desire for flourishing. But what happens when fear enters in, and that protection becomes a means of control or a way to exercise power?

Our Christian tradition knows this impulse all too well. We have told ourselves that we must protect the Bible by not questioning its words, protect the tradition by resisting new movement of the Spirit, protect the culture by pushing it in public spaces at every turn. Churches limit the pulpit, and restrict the welcome, and scold the teenagers, and police the boundaries, all the while confusing this life with insurance for the next. One thing leads to another, and we find ourselves standing guard over the gospel, not noticing that our witness of it has withered and died under our watch.

What we need – what Catherine the Great needed, what the Czar needed – was not a guardian standing tall and strong to protect a rose bush, but a gardener, bending and stooping and working in the soil to nurture the plant for its growth.

III.

Supposing **him** to be the gardener wasn't all that far-fetched. He was in the garden, of course, where she had come early in the morning on the first day of the week while it was still dark. Her body racked with grief and her eyes still swollen from weeping, coming to the tomb to anoint his body was the least she could do for her murdered friend and teacher. On Friday, she'd stood at that Roman cross and watched as he was crucified by the power of the state. Too threatening, they'd said. Claiming to be a king over a kingdom not of this world? They'd scoffed as they neutralized the threat.

But the agony hadn't ended there, for now his body was nowhere to be found. The stone was rolled away, and the wrappings were folded neatly where his body should have been. Somehow that was enough for Peter and

the beloved disciple to run and see, believing but not yet understanding. Bereft in her grief, Mary remained: last at the cross, first at the tomb, staying near in her love like a sentry keeping watch.

“Why are you weeping?” It’s a curious question in a cemetery of all places (*isn’t it obvious?*), and a curious pair of messengers who asked them. “They’ve taken away my Lord,” she cried, undeterred, “and I do not know where they have laid him.”

And there, as her tears watered the ground, with the smell of fresh earth all around her, she turned and saw another standing before her. I imagine that in her grief, she could have mistaken him for a soldier, recalling the trauma of those who carried out his death just days prior. She could have imagined him to be a guardian of the tombs, an official unmoved by her tears. But no – supposing **him** to be the gardener... supposing him to be the **gardener!**... Mary unknowingly spoke to the risen Christ.

I wonder: did she suppose him to be the gardener because his clothes bore the marks of a day outside? Was the dust of the tomb still under his fingernails or bits of earth still stuck in his hair? Did she mistake that place for the garden where he was crucified? Was he bearing a gardening tool, ready to till, uproot, harvest, and tend the vines of our souls? Or did she just have a sense that this man was one transformed, one whose redemption pressed all the way back to the Garden of Eden and forward to the end of time?

“Tell me where you have laid him,” she asked of that gardener, to which he responded with every bit of the love and recognition and identity wrapped up in just a word: *Mary*. *Mary!* In that instant she knew! Her teacher, her friend, Jesus the Risen Indeed. At his insistence, she departs with a word for the disciples, a word for all who’d wonder, echoing throughout all of time and

space as the ultimate proclamation of good news. Not a proclamation of belief or right-thinking. Not a proclamation of tradition or right-acting. No — it was a word of encounter, a word that burst forth like bulbs sprouting beneath the soil who have finally pressed up to the light. *I have seen the Lord!*

III.

Sometimes, it's the day before Easter when pastors run their Easter errands. Yesterday, my kids and I were doing so, when Annabelle started chronicling events of Easters gone by. One year, Liam had the stomach bug. Last year was the downtown power outage, right in the middle of worship. (Y'all remember that?) This year, the rain! "You know," she observed, wise beyond her eleven years, "something always happens on Easter!"

Something always happens on Easter, doesn't it?

But something always happens every day, especially these days, it seems. Every day, our feeds and feelings are flooded with dread and despair. *The world is always like this, we say. The power will always oppress the weak. The rich will always want more. The news will always be bad. The cycle of struggle will always be mine.* And then the "nevers" set in. *I'll never get over it, we say. I'll never find love again. Never reconcile with my friend. Never do the thing I most want to do. Never change these patterns.* The crosses that litter the horizons of our lives – singular and shared – feel fixed, permanent, unmoving.

But something always happens at Easter! Even the Easter that dawns amidst wars in our world and our communities and a torn social fabric everywhere we turn. Even the Easter of the last-ditch treatment and the one-more-shot marriage, of overstuffed adolescent mental health clinics and dismantled institutions. Even the Easter when the defeat and death of Friday still lingers in the morning dawn.

Something always happens at Easter, but we don't always see it. That's how it works in the garden, though. Because when the seeds are pressed into the ground, they're buried. The work of the seed happens in the dark, when things seem to be the most covered and hopeless and, well, *dead*. That is, until with water and air and time and love, a shoot presses through to new life.

The gardener knows this, of course. But the gardener also knows what we do when something always happens, and our fear and anger and envy and despair drive us to lock down our hearts and put a soldier at its gates. Indeed, he stoops, pruning and planting seeds of new life with the tenderness of a gardener – seeds in the ground and a body in the tomb – making all things new once again.

Something always happens at Easter, and from the very first to the very last, we who are the Easter people must become a planting people, taking our cue from the one supposed to be a gardener. Easter people fling seeds with holy abandon – seeds of inclusion and justice, seeds of repair and reconciliation, seeds of love – fierce love, bold love, risk-something-big-for-something-good love. Easter people are the ones who know we're at our best when we remember these gifts together – so the Easter people are present together, and worship together, and fellowship together, and serve together, and pray together, and march together, and work for justice together, and find grace together. The ones who know that when these things happen, Easter happens, again and again and again. Something comes alive within us and among us. *Resurrection*, you might say.

How easy it would be to stand guard over what was or what is or what might be – protecting, immobilizing, running back instead of pressing forward. But do not grasp, Jesus reminds us. For I am now everywhere.

Everywhere empires are brought down by hope. Everywhere the feast is enough to fill. Everywhere wounds are bandaged by enemies. Everywhere wayward ones are welcomed home again. Everywhere two people, despite all evidence to the contrary, find their way to reconciliation. Everywhere peacemakers refuse to be silent in the face of war. Everywhere that actual people, with actual lives, and actual heartache, and actual suffering discover that – *somehow!* – in Christ, suffering isn't all there is. Everywhere the worst thing isn't the last thing. Everywhere there is flourishing and meaning-making, struggle and rising, co-creation and mutual liberation. *Everywhere there is life.* Everywhere all things are made new again.

IV.

Friends, my hope for us this Easter is that we may beat our guardian swords into plowshares for the garden. May our tears of all we've grieved water what we'll plant. May we receive the good gifts of the gardener indeed.

For we have seen the Lord!

Amen!