

Sunday 31 March - Easter Day - Jesus the Gardener – Beth Keith

Beth Keith leads this All Age celebration of Easter Day.

Readings:

John 20. 1-10

Sermon: Jesus the Gardener – Beth Keith

Can anyone guess what's in this egg box? It turns out to contain cress growing in eggshells. Some as seeds, some sprouting, and some full-grown cress.



The brilliant thing about cress is that it grows really fast, so if you sow some cress within a few days you're able to eat it. The other brilliant thing about cress is that you can watch it grow. Usually when we plant seeds we put them into soil. The tiny seed goes into the soil, seemingly dead, and we don't see what happens until weeks later a tiny shoot appears through the soil. But with cress you can actually see the shoots sprouting out of the seeds, then growing longer shoots, and finally leaves.

This morning, we read the story of the resurrection from John's Gospel. And one of the things John's Gospel does, is to leave a thread of clues in the text. These clues or pointers, tell the story, and also add layers of meaning. In the story this morning we heard how Mary had gone to the tomb. She found two angels inside but no Jesus. And then she went out and saw Jesus, but she didn't realise who it was. And we're told that she thinks it's the gardener.

On one level, perhaps this is an easy and understandable mistake to make. She was not expecting to find Jesus alive. She wanted to know who had taken his body. And that is one layer of meaning in the story. But perhaps the author is giving us a special clue, another layer with a special meaning. By mentioning the gardener, the author is pointing us towards other mentions of gardens. At the start of John's Gospel, we read about Jesus being God's word; there before time began, present at the first metaphorical garden, the garden of Eden. And in the book of Revelation, which like the Gospel of John, was also written by John's community,

we are given the image of an eternal garden, where life flourishes and there is no death or decay.

So, John gives us a clue here. In this encounter between Jesus and Mary, this is another important garden. Not the garden of Eden, and not the garden of heaven, but a place where new life begins. Mary mistook Jesus as the gardener. And of course, Jesus is not just the local gardener, here to tend the plants around the tombs. But he is a type of gardener. He is The Gardener, the eternal gardener, caring for the world, existing before and beyond time. But John's Gospel is not just giving us a clue about who Jesus is, perhaps there is another clue here too. By pointing to Jesus as a type of gardener, we are invited to think back and recall the things that Jesus said about gardening. Or rather about seeds, about sowing, and about new life flourishing.

Earlier in the Gospel we read that, before Jesus died, he thought he was going to die, and he talked to his friends about it. One time when he was talking to his friends about his coming death, he gave them the image of a seed and said: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit". So, one clue here points to Jesus being the eternal gardener, helping the earth to flourish. But this clue also reminds us that Jesus called himself a seed. The seed that dies in the earth, and then grows new life.

Unlike the cress you can see, most seeds go into the ground, and seemingly die. We don't know what's happening, we can't see what's going on, until the new shoots emerge. In the various narratives of the resurrection, new life emerges in the dark. There's no account of what happened. We don't know how new life wriggled free, like the shoots breaking out of the seed. But we can see how new life flourished and grew.

It can feel quite jarring to talk of new life flowing from death. Especially in the times when we live in the shadow death. But God promises to be with us always, and especially at those time. And Jesus shows us how love and life break through, even in the darkest of places.

© Beth Keith (2024)