

In the Garden: Reversing Eden, Restoring Paradise Sunday, 4/21/19

1 In the course of just a little over a month, we've travelled almost the entire breadth of the Scriptures on our journey through the gardens of the Bible, telling the sweeping story of God's creation and salvation. But our journey isn't over yet. The death of Jesus on the cross at Golgotha on Good Friday is not just the end of the story that began with the birth of Jesus in a Bethlehem manger on Christmas day. Easter is the dramatic pivot point in the epic saga that began when God first spoke, "Let there be light!" and created us to live in harmony with each other, with God, and with all of God's creation. It began in the Garden of Eden, it took a 180 degree turn with the resurrection of Jesus in the garden of Golgotha, and as we'll see this morning, it's headed for a breath-taking conclusion in a stunning recreation of the Garden of Eden, a beautiful reunion of heaven and earth. God's plan for you began when Adam and Eve were given the breath of life in the Garden of Eden. It concludes with an eternity in a restored paradise where the curse of Eden has been reversed forever.

2 I said last week that it was no accident that John, of all the Gospel writers, pointed out for us that the tomb of Jesus was in a garden, a garden near to the cross where Jesus was crucified. It may well have been a cave, like this one, but with a large stone rolled in front of the opening. As we heard in the first Bible reading this morning, John is also alone among the Gospel writers to point out that Mary, coming to the empty tomb on Easter morning, mistook the risen Christ as a gardener. John intentionally pictures Jesus as God's gardener, who was not only present at the beginning of time (read the first chapter of John again if you want a refresher on that) but who also came in the flesh on Christmas morning to begin his work of ushering in the restoration of the Garden of Eden on earth.

3 That new Eden is what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven. We spend most of the church year focused on the three years in the life of Jesus when he taught and demonstrated for us what it means for heaven to be on earth, or as we say when we pray The Lord's Prayer, for God's will to be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Today, we'll look past those pictures of the Kingdom described in the Gospels to the vision given to John of what the eternal Garden of Eden will look like, our ultimate destination when we leave these mortal bodies and put on imperishable resurrection bodies. It may sound a little different than you expect, with not a halo or harp in sight!

I'm reading from the book of Revelation, the vision given to the Apostle John about 65 years after the resurrection of Jesus, a time of intense persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire, while John was living in exile on the island of Patmos. As you hear these words from Revelation, the big questions I want you to ask of yourself are these: "What does the resurrection of Jesus have to do with John's vision of eternity? What implications does this vision have for me, both my present and my future?" I'm reading now from Revelation 22, verses 1-5 in the New Living Translation. [{Read Revelation 22:15, NLT}](#)

4 Revelation can admittedly evoke some strange images. Some of them are truly beautiful, like the river of the water of life. But others are downright bizarre. For example, what was that bit about God's name being written on our foreheads? Does that mean we're all getting facial tattoos in the afterlife? Not exactly. Some of you are disappointed by that, most of us are relieved. Remember that the visions given in the Bible are just that- visions. They tend to have a dream-like quality, with plenty of symbols present that aren't necessarily intended to be taken literally. The facial tattoos are a great example of that- an outward symbol of the reality that we will all belong fully to God. In many ways, it's like the water of baptism, an outward sign of an inward grace given by God's Spirit. So to help you answer one of those questions that I posed to you earlier, this vision of the New Eden is intended to offer you comfort, an assurance that if you're not sure today that you belong to God, then in the life to come there will be absolutely no room left for ambiguity. By faith, you are a beloved child of God today and for all of eternity, and you don't even need to get a tattoo to prove it!

5 What does all this have to do with Jesus? Do you remember back in the Garden of Eden as it's described in Genesis, the river that flowed from Eden, and the tree in center of the garden? In a way, Jesus is the Tree of life and the river of the water of life. When Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden, they were cut off from eternal life, cursed and doomed to die. No amount of strict rule following was or is able to fix that problem. It took Jesus, the Son of God nailed to a tree, who became the means for the curse to be reversed and for us to once again approach the Tree and the water of Life.

What does all this have to do with Jesus? If Jesus had died and remained in the tomb, he may have been remembered as an inspired teacher and a courageous moral leader. But

there are no bones of Jesus left for us to find. The tomb was empty, and the tomb is still empty, and because Jesus defeated death on our behalf, we can be confident that this life we live is not the end of our journey. Jesus was who he said he was: the alpha and omega, the first and the last; the way, the truth, and the life; the light of the world; the bread of life; the resurrection and the life. And because Jesus proved he was indeed the Son of God, we can be confident of his promise that he has gone to prepare a place for us with the Father, a place of surpassing beauty, where all wounds will be healed and we will at last experience the fullness of God's plan as we live in complete harmony with each other, with the restored creation, and in the direct presence of our loving, righteous, and powerful God.

6 This isn't exactly the picture painted in Revelation 22, but there's something about this stream that I photographed on the way to Whistler Mountain in Canada that made me think of the river of the water of life. Maybe it was all the bright, living greenery on both sides of the stream, or the way the crystal-clear mountain water moved with such energy over the rocks on the bed of the stream.

I don't know about you, but I could use a full submersion in the river of the water of life. I don't care how cold it is, I'm ready to take the plunge! It's been a difficult year, not just for me, and not just for Minnesotans. There's so much strife and brokenness in our lives and in the world around us that it can overwhelm us and lead us to conclude that hope is either a thing of the past or a thing for foolish people. Broken relationships, broken bodies, snow, more snow, politics, politics, politics, and did I mention- politics?

The empty tomb of Easter reminds us that hope is not a thing of the past. Perhaps our problem has been that we've simply put our hope in the wrong things. Anything or any person other than Jesus is bound to disappoint you. But you can count on Jesus. Faith in the living Christ is what brings meaning to each day and offers the hope of restoration and reconciliation of all that is broken. Because the garden tomb was empty 2,000 years ago in ancient Palestine, you can be certain that your future is not only a good one, but a perfect one, marked by the blessing of living more abundantly in the garden of God's re-creation than we can even imagine. May it be so for each of us this very day. Amen.



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