

Sermon: Cultivating Hope

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Scriptures: Genesis 1:1-2:4; John 20:1-18

Introduction:

What comes to mind when you think of the word “garden?” Perhaps you picture a large plot of land with rows of fruits and vegetables. Maybe you think about your own flower beds and the excitement that comes with spring. You might even imagine Central Park or whimsical vines which spread in many directions. There is no right answer to this question, of course. A garden is all these things and more. Matthew Rawle, in his book, *The Grace of Les Misérables*, says that, if he had to give the Bible a new title, it might most appropriately be called, “A Tale of Three Gardens.”

Throughout the Lenten season, we have been working our way through Pastor Rawle’s book, both in worship and in study: comparing and contrasting themes within the story of *Les Misérables* and scripture. Many will be familiar with the story of Jean Valjean, the titular protagonist of *Les Misérables*, who served 19 years in prison 19th century France for the crime of stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving niece. Throughout this epic story, we meet many other characters, both noble and... not... as we weave our way to the end of Valjean’s life and he attempts to find redemption and peace.

While many of the topics covered in the book offer a biblical take on themes lived out through the characters—grace, justice, poverty, love, empathy, and revolution—the final chapter turns us toward a place, the garden: a traditional symbol of hope and new beginnings and a most appropriate turn to make this Easter morning. But before we turn there, let’s listen to the scriptures: Genesis 1:1-2:4; John 20:1-18.

Sermon:

In the story of *Les Misérables*, gardens remind us of the different ways in which we experience grace. Early in the narrative, a kindly priest enters the life of Jean Valjean. Valjean was a convict on parole, a penniless man in need of food and shelter. Valjean finds that in a convent and in the generosity of God's people. For the priest, a garden represents Sabbath: a place of rest from the busy-ness of the world. For him, it offers space to connect with God's creation. The priest needs the garden in the same way many of us do: the garden gives us something to do, something to nurture or cultivate, something to care for.

Much like the first man and woman in Eden, gardens can be, for some, idyllic and peaceful. A place of solace, or prayer, or meditation. I've always loved to see the ways that many religious and non-religious institutions adopt a space for a garden. In a divisive world made of walls to keep us apart, it is one of the things we all seem to have in common.

Just last year, we gathered to dedicate our prayer garden, a small plot of land on the church property funded by members and friends, who purchased bricks, that now surround the garden and honor loved ones. When I look at that garden, which this morning contains a hopeful cross draped in white, I can't help but be reminded of the ways in which clear signs of God's creation poke through our paved-over world. Even if we aren't fans of the great outdoors, none of us can deny the benefits of a little sunshine, nature, and fresh air. Sometimes grace is just that: fresh air offering us a moment to breathe again.

If you've ever tried to cultivate a garden, though, you'll know that gardens require quite a bit of work. Adam and Eve experienced an intimate relationship with God in Eden, rejoicing in the gift of life that surrounded them. God may have created it, but it was the humans' job was to keep and till the garden. They knew the hard work of cultivation. In a very real way, this is also Valjean's view of grace:

sometimes it is hard work. Valjean will go through many phases throughout his life: an uncle, a convict, a mayor, factory owner, father, and revolutionary. He will also spend time gardening, learning throughout that just as nature can be transformed with a little careful cultivation, so can our lives. It takes Valjean a lifetime to reap the beauty of the grace he received from that priest who gave him shelter and forgiveness. Only with dedication and perseverance will his hope of redemption be fulfilled.

Eden, an expression of God's love for the world, isn't the only garden represented in the biblical narrative. In Matthew's gospel, we get the scene of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Just as Valjean agonized, painfully, over the grace he received, Jesus, God made flesh, agonized here. He knew he was headed to his arrest, mock-trial, and crucifixion. When we read this scene in the gospels, Jesus was already suffering and that suffering would grow. This garden is far from the idyllic one created in Eden. This is God in Jesus, wrestling with grace and what it will cost him. Instead of receiving clothes, as did the man and woman upon leaving the garden, Jesus is stripped, beaten, mocked, and nailed to the cross. Here, grace comes at a cost.

And yet, my friends, there is hope! On the third day, when Mary (and the other women) went the garden, the tomb was empty! In her grief, Mary thinks that the risen Lord is a gardener. This isn't a case of mistaken identity; rather she is seeing Christ for the fully human and fully divine master gardener he is. God's first gift to humanity was a garden, and our first job was keeping it. *So of course*, Jesus looks like a gardener at the Resurrection! In his risen state, Jesus could only appear as the ultimate vision of a cultivator of hope: a gardener. To plant a garden, in the words of the great, ever hopeful Audrey Hepburn, is to believe in tomorrow. Jesus in his risen state shows Mary that because he lives, she (and we) can believe in tomorrow.

God could have ended the story there. Left off on this note of hope, but that's not the end of the story, is it? At the end of *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean dies, but the author, Victor Hugo is not done. He leaves us with the presence of two little children on the street, begging for food. This heartbreaking scene is a powerful reminder that just because Valjean has found his peace, the work of grace is not over.

In that garden tomb, Christ commands Mary Magdalene to carry forth the good news of his resurrection. In other words: Christ shows us that the hard work is just beginning. Christ indeed is risen, which gives us great hope! Now comes the hard work of grace: to cultivate the love of God in our own lives and share that love with the world.

Let's get our gardening tools, and go to work.

Amen.