
The Secret Garden

John 20.1, 11-18

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 12, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder whether you've ever had a secret rendezvous. It's the kind of thing that makes you whisper for fear of being found out, or shiver with suppressed excitement. A phone call, an email, or a text message says "Meet me tonight at 6. You're the only person who can help me;" or "I've got something I need to tell you;" or even "I just can't go another day without seeing you." You're breathless, your heart's pounding, and you're overcome with impatient curiosity and furtive intrigue.

Easter's about not just one secret rendezvous, but a whole series, all taking place at the same time. And they all take place in a garden. One book in the Bible has a number of references to secret meetings in a garden. And that book is the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is about erotic love, about a physical, intimate, passionate embrace between two people whose lovemaking is a kind of worship of God. In the coming together of two lovers Song of Songs invite us to see that God's deepest desire is for us and our deepest desire is for God. There's a reason why the Song of Songs is particularly significant. Jesus' death took place at Passover. At each of their five great festivals the Jews read one of the shorter Old Testament books, known as the Scrolls. The scroll they read at Passover is the Song of Songs. And repeatedly the Song of Songs refers to a garden, and represents the garden as a place of secret rendezvous and fertile growth.

In the Middle East, gardens aren't very common. They're very special. The climate is dry, the ground is dusty, rain can be rare. In Arabic the word "garden" has a particular resonance. The Arabic word for "garden" is "paradise." That's where the whole notion of paradise comes from. Paradise means flowing water in a desert, green shoots in dry ground, lush beauty in the midst of arid wastelands. Easter is a glimpse into paradise, because the Easter story shows us a series of wondrous meetings all taking place in a secret garden one special morning.

Let's look at the first rendezvous. Easter is the moment when the beginning meets the end. At the start of the Bible there's a man and a woman in a garden. Adam and Eve. Intimacy and destiny. All of creation focused in this one relationship. And at the end there's another encounter in a garden. This time it's God and his bride the church coming down from heaven as the new Jerusalem, in a garden where the leaves on the trees are for the healing of the nations. And now here, on Easter morning, Jesus meets Mary Magdalene, a man meets a woman, in a garden. Beginning meets end, creation meets completion right here in this resurrection garden. Resurrection shows us the *last* page of the story, how things will be for all time; but it also shows us the *first* page of the story, by placing a man and a woman in a garden, just like in Genesis. Here, in this garden, in the meeting of this man and woman, the beginning and end of all things meet. The resurrection of Jesus is the end of the beginning and it's the beginning of the end. It's the central moment of history. That's quite a big secret. Whisper it if you dare.

And there's more. Easter's the moment where the body meets the soul. We're used to controversy between religion and science. We're used to science saying we're just fragile physical bodies with predictable behaviors and religion saying we're really immortal souls with a God-given identity. But the resurrection of Jesus cuts through this debate. Here is Jesus, utterly physical, scarred and defeated by the agony of crucifixion, and now so real before Mary that she clings on to him for all she's worth. He's not an intangible soul – he's the most real and physical thing she's ever felt and touched. And yet he's the most holy thing too. Easter is a reaffirmation of Christmas: the resurrection is a reaffirmation of the incarnation. God's not above and beyond flesh and blood – God's a reality *in* flesh and blood, now and for ever. This is the central moment of history, and what we see in Jesus is the resurrection body, fully human, fully physical, fully infused with the spirit of God. The old idea that the body tied us to earth and the soul tied us to God has gone. Here in the risen Lord heaven and earth are united as never before. Here we see the destiny for our bodies and souls: to be remade beyond death as people soaked in humanity and immersed in God. Easter's the day we glimpse eternity. That's quite a big secret. Whisper it if you dare.

But there's even more. Easter's the moment when the personal meets the social. When we think about dying maybe our deepest fear is not pain, or even oblivion, but being fundamentally eternally alone. Never to wake up seems terrifying. But one day to wake up and be eternally alone seems even worse. Death seems the most isolating experience imaginable. But here in the garden Jesus' resurrection isn't something for him alone. He shares it with Mary. He tenderly speaks her name. When we deeply love someone we're terrified that our bodily limitations, our other commitments, and our impending deaths mean we can't be truly, intimately, everlastingly as one with them as we yearn to be. But here's Jesus, once dead now risen, truly, intimately, everlastingly with Mary. And not just with Mary, but with the people he calls the "brothers." The mystery of love is how we can love one person so much and yet still love others too. Here that mystery's solved. God in the risen Christ loves us all, but loves each one of us as if we were the only one. And once again the garden's crucial. Here the garden is telling us that resurrection is not just intimate, not just social, but also cosmic. It's for all creation. The garden represents the whole non-human creation. Just as Adam and Eve were the focal point for the destiny and fall of all things, so this secret meeting between Jesus and Mary is the focal point for the resurrection of all things. Easter is when the personal meets the social, the social meets the cosmic, and Jesus is all in all. This is a picture of everlasting life with God. That's another very big secret. Whisper it if you dare.

Here we have a series of meetings in a secret garden. Each meeting is about one and the same thing. And that thing is the best news and the biggest secret in the world: the fulfilment of God's deep desire for us and the fulfilment of our deep desire for God. These meetings are showing us what's meant by paradise.

One kind of theatre that never goes out of fashion is farce. Here's the scene that everybody loves. We get three subplots which all reach their climax at the same time. In the first there's two characters called the beginning and the end. In the second there's two characters called the body and the soul. In the third there's two characters called the personal and the social. It turns out that they've each made separate secret arrangements to meet by the large rock in the garden near Golgotha early on Sunday morning. The audience realizes that all six characters are going to show up at the same place at the same time, but in a farce, the characters don't know what the audience knows. Most likely they each walk slowly and secretively backwards toward each other and if you want to ham it up you have piano notes that go du...du...du...du...doooo-duh-duh-duh-duh... until they all bump backsides and jump into the air. It's the kind of thing it's hilarious to watch over and over again because each time you not only laugh at the characters but you also more deeply appreciate their interconnections and the intricacies of the plot that brought them all there.

And this meeting in the garden between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is a lot like farce. It's a simultaneous secret rendezvous between beginning and end, between body and soul, between person and society. You can see Mary backing slowly away from the tomb and bumping into a man she takes to be the gardener. She's so blinded by grief she stupidly thinks he's the gardener! But the whole point is, he is the gardener! He's the Lord who'd made the Garden of Eden, who'd opened up creation as a playground of delights. This is the reunion of creation and final destiny, and in the clumsiness of her grief, Mary's stumbled into it.

Meanwhile Mary's still peering into the empty tomb. She's still living in a world where body's separated from soul. She's looking at the empty place where the dead body ought to be, and she's backing away from it...and though she knows she's bumped into a living person, it doesn't cross her mind it might be Jesus because she knows Jesus is dead and all she's hoping to find is his body. But the whole point is, this is the great reunion of body and soul, and she's about to be the first to witness it. And straightaway she grabs hold of Jesus, which means she gets the message that this really is God and this really is flesh and blood, so it's Christmas all over again, but even better this time because this time it's forever.

And then think again about the significance of the resurrection as an event both between Jesus and Mary, and between Jesus and the brothers. Mary – isolated, grieving, captivated by death – the epitome of what it means to be lost – is walking backwards from the tomb in dismay... when she's deeply met in the most tender way possible – by the good shepherd who knows her by name. "Mary." Jesus has made the long journey to all humanity to show us the face of God in spite of our sin, and now here he makes a special journey to show his risen face to just one of us, Mary, softly and tenderly. Because he sought out and met Mary, we have reason to hope that he'll do just the same to you and me. He died to save us all, but he makes a resurrection appearance to each one of us as if we were the only one.

I wonder if you have a secret garden. I wonder whether, this Easter morning, there are two irreconcilable commitments, two overlapping loves, two painfully separated poles in your life. And I wonder whether this morning there may be a secret rendezvous in a garden, and while God is getting on with the business of bringing together personal and social, beginning and end, body and soul, God may be just as busy reconciling the contradictory extremes in your heart. I wonder if in Jesus' tender words of greeting and recognition, "Mary," you hear a call to bring to harmony the discordant notes in your being. And if so, this Easter morning may not just be a celebration of the way God resurrects all things, but even a celebration of the way God reconciles you.

Easter's about a garden. Easter's about the coming together of creation and destiny, body and soul, personal and social. Easter fulfils our desire for God and God's desire for us. And all of this is disclosed in an encounter between a man and a woman in a garden. A gentle presence, a gentle touch, a gentle word. This is eternal life. This is paradise.