

**Come to the Garden: 6. Paradise Restored**  
**John 20:1, 11-16; Revelation 22:1-3**  
**Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

Every preacher's challenge is what to say on Easter. This is my 18<sup>th</sup> Easter to be preaching here, and the Bible hasn't changed. It is the same Bible story year after year. The story hasn't changed but I need what Easter offers. This year feels different to me. Last Easter afternoon, I joined my parents, my siblings and their families for what would be our final family meal with my Dad. At the time, we didn't know it would be our final meal in which we'd all be with him but 30 days later his journey with Alzheimer's Disease would come to an end. I would invite my 3 sisters and my mother to gather around my Dad's bed as I took my anointing oil and anointed his head with the sign of the cross saying, "Dad, you are marked with the sign of the cross, sealed as God's own forever." Then as we touched this man that we had loved our entire lives, we gave him back to God. It's a ritual that I lead several times every year for families in this church, but it felt different – it felt entirely different when it was my Dad.

Maybe you've been in that place – and if you haven't, one day you will be. In such moments, death is real. We want – we need to know – what do we believe? Is there really such a thing as life after death? Will I see my Dad again? Will he be okay? And this Easter, I need to hear this. I only get a finite number of years, and I'm actually okay with that. What troubles me is the thought of my wife or my children – or in the case of last spring, my Dad's dying. Mortality is our human condition. Suffering, pain, adversity – it's our human condition. And the answer to all of this is Easter. Easter is God's answer to our human condition.

For the past several weeks, we've focused on the garden stories that are found in the Bible. The Bible begins in a garden. Genesis 1 tells us there is a garden paradise that God created and when God looked at everything God created, God said, it is very good. It was paradise. And then in Genesis 2 & 3, we learn that God placed humans in this garden with the instruction that they could everything the garden had to offer except one thing. "You may not eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for on the day that you do that you will surely die." And what happens? They reach for the one thing that can't have. But it turns out that this is really our story. What happens when you are told you can't have something? \$500 million lottery jackpot and you won't win it, and the person who does – their life is destroyed – but what do you do? You listen to the serpent whisper, "someone has to win and it could be you!" Or the speed limit on 394 is 55 but do you drive 54? No, you push the limit. And when Adam and Eve are caught doing what they know they should not be doing, they don't admit their mistake. They blame and then carry around shame. It's really our story, isn't it? And their actions send them out of the garden and away from the tree that would have given life. Paradise is lost. And then Cain kills his brother Abel, and every day last week somewhere around the world Cain was still killing his brother. The story of brokenness and mortality. That's our story. Paradise lost. The story of the Old Testament is how God kept trying to woo us back, and for a time, people turned to God - but it didn't last. We listen to the serpent's whisper, we reach for what's forbidden, we hurt the people we profess to love the most.

But then 2000 years ago, God became flesh. God sent Jesus to heal the brokenness in this world, to fix what was broken, to show us the way back to the garden paradise. But the most religious and the Roman officials conspire together to kill him. Jesus is crucified and buried. Just when it seemed like goodness would prevail, darkness got the upper hand. It seemed evil had won. Maybe you've been to that place where the worst thing has happened, and you don't know what's next. But early on Easter morning, the stone that held Jesus in the tomb was cast aside,

and Jesus was raised to life. He conquered evil, hate, suffering, sorrow and pain. He took on the worst of this world and won. Easter proclaims, The worst thing is never the last thing.

And it is in this resurrection garden that we find a living hope. Mary Magdalene shows up in the Garden, and the tomb is empty. She meets Jesus but at first she doesn't recognize him and thinks he is the gardener. In 1912, Austin Miles opened his Bible to his favorite scripture – John, chapter 20. And that day as he read the verses, the words came to mind that would become one of the best known hymns in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. He imagined Mary Magdalene singing: I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses. It's early Sunday morning, she is thinking about how Jesus is dead and she's weeping, but then he speaks and the sound of his voice makes the birds hush their singing. He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there; none other has ever known. I went online to find someone who sang this hymn. Elvis recorded it. So did Johnny Cash, Alan Jackson, and others. And then I found this recording by a woman named Joey Feek and her husband, Rory. [video]

Joey was awarded a Grammy last year posthumously. Still in her 30s, she lost her two year battle with cancer, but it was the faith she sang about in that hymn that sustained her. As she was walking through the valley of the shadow of death, it was the knowledge that he walked with her and talked with her. It is the hope that she would see what we only dream about on this side of eternity. Knowing that her husband and daughter would be okay and they would see each other once again. She knew the worst thing was not the last thing.

If I know death is not the end, it changes how I live. I can take risks and do what God calls me to do because I know death is not the end. I look at life differently. The worst is not the last. When the unexpected happens, it's not God's plan. God does not want us to suffer. What parent wants their child to live in pain? But through the suffering and the pain, we know God walks with us. I see that in this congregation where people have taken their own adversity and used it to help others who are facing something similar. A young woman who dropped out of college due to cancer is now in graduate school to do cancer research. An adult who was diagnosed with diabetes as a child, now encourages others and advocates for medical research. A man who experienced homelessness, now works to provide shelter for those who are homeless. Parents who experienced the death of their child now come alongside others who have also lost a child. A victim of sexual abuse is devoting her life to preventing others from experiencing what she experienced.

Easter night, Jesus met with his disciples and as he was meeting with them he does something that God did in the Garden of Eden. In the Garden of Eden, God breathes into this human that God has just formed and he comes to life. And now Jesus breathes on the disciples, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." And they receive it. And Jesus says, **As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.** And then he sends them out to continue the mission that he began. Sometimes, we think Easter is all about how I get to go to heaven, and I don't need to be afraid of death, and I'll be able to see my loved one again. And that's important. But Jesus' primary purpose in coming to earth was not to get you to heaven, but to get heaven here on earth – to restore paradise. It's what he taught and it's why he showed us how to live. It's what he taught in a prayer that many of us memorized: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Easter calls us to be people of hope who bring hope and healing to a broken world. How are you doing that? How are you bringing healing and hope to a broken world?

Ten days ago, Emily – a six year old in this church decided to set up a hot chocolate stand at the end of her driveway. Initially it was her idea to raise funds so she could get more toys, but when her parents suggested it could be a way to help others she jumped at the opportunity. She decided whatever she raised she would use to buy cereal for the food shelf. Her parents decided to match what she raised, thinking she might raise \$5 or at best \$10 (after all, it's still winter; would anybody stop?). Here she is at her hot chocolate stand [photo]. That day she didn't raise \$5 or \$10 because her church family heard about her chocolate stand and began showing up. and she ended up raising \$59 which her parents matched. They went to Target and purchased 61 boxes of cereal which they brought to church last Sunday. It was one of those "on earth as it is in heaven" moments. What a great thing to do, but I don't think if I set up a hot chocolate stand at the end of my driveway this afternoon I would be able to do what she did! But I can do something.

Every year this church gives hundreds of thousands of dollars to programs beyond this church. One of our Easter offering recipients this year is Imara International. Six years ago, we commissioned a missionary to leave this church and go to Kenya where she founded a program to assist teenaged mothers. Here's the first mom and her daughter who came to Imara five and half years ago. [photo] Ngina was 16 years old and pregnant – and not because it was her choice. She was living in Nairobi and delivered her baby at home by herself, a home where that child was not wanted. Ngina and her baby named Gift went to the hospital and then to a children's home which heard about Carol Erickson and a brand new place called Imara that this church made possible. It saved their lives. Imara has given Ngina a safe place where she could go to school and achieve one of her dreams for her daughter, Gift. She wants Gift to have an education – and a few weeks ago Gift started kindergarten. Another "earth as it is in heaven" moment. This is paradise restored.

At the very end of the Bible, there is another garden. The writer of Revelation has a vision of a garden with the river of life, and at the center of that garden is a tree – the very tree that was in the Garden of Eden. It was the tree Adam and Eve could have continued to eat from and received eternal life if they had not reached for the forbidden fruit. **And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse.** In this garden, all the saints are gathered around the throne of God. There is no need for the sun because God is the light, and people live with God forever and ever. **He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.** Every one of our "earth as it is in heaven" moments provides a glimpse of this garden – the garden paradise restored.

In our yard last fall, I planted dozens of daffodil and tulip bulbs. Drive by our home today and you would have no idea that I did that. But I planted them because I believe there will be a spring a garden will emerge far more glorious that we can see today. It's easy to stand in the middle of a springtime garden and say I believe. It's quite another to stand here in the snow and cold of a winter that will not let go, working to bring heaven here on earth. Because of Easter, we have a living hope. The worst thing is never the last thing. One day there will be a garden. My dad is already there and he's waiting for me. I don't just believe that, I'm counting on it.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of April 1, 2018**

**Weekly Prayer:** Resurrecting God, the tomb is empty! Christ lives! Easter news is good news! We are glad to be alive and grateful for your love that will never fail us. Fill us with incredible joy, everlasting peace, and unquenchable hope this day and always. Amen.

## Monday, April 2

### Scripture: John 20:1-16

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying. Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher).

**Observation:** Even when they found Jesus' tomb in the garden empty, Mary (and then two of the male disciples) were troubled, not excited. The men left, but Mary stayed, weeping. John said she thought the man asking who she was looking for was "the gardener." Symbolically, he was. Adam failed in the first garden (Genesis 3), but Jesus (the "second Adam") would tend earth's "garden" well (Romans 5:15-21). Mary didn't recognize Jesus' voice at first. But apparently the way he said her name was unmistakable.

**Application:** Mary went to the tomb "while it was still dark." She clearly didn't expect to find Jesus alive, but in love and devotion she was eager to care for his body as soon as possible. (The Jewish laws Jesus had challenged forbade that on the Sabbath.) How can you nurture a desire to go to Jesus, even in times of despair and darkness? What practices and choices can build you a "first name" relationship with Jesus, a link between your heart and his?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, if my attention strays and I don't recognize you, please call me by name and draw me again into a saving connection with you as my risen Savior. Amen.

## Tuesday, April 3

### Scripture: John 20:19-23

It was still the first day of the week. That evening, while the disciples were behind closed doors because they were afraid of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were filled with joy. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you don't forgive them, they aren't forgiven."

**Observation:** Everything the disciples had believed seemed lost. Jesus, their leader and would-be Messiah was dead, and now his body was missing. The disciples hid, afraid the Jewish authorities would come after them next. But no one had stolen Jesus' body. He was still their Messiah, in ways that reached beyond their wildest dreams. "Jesus...stood among them"—it was really him, alive, and they were filled with joy. He gave them his peace, his purpose ("As the Father sent me, so I am sending you"), and his power ("Receive the Holy Spirit").

**Application:** John kept including clues to remind his readers of the creation stories in Genesis 1-3. After Jesus commissioned the disciples in verse 21, "he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'"—a clear echo of Genesis 2:7. How has Jesus breathed new hope and purpose—new life—into you? In what ways can you tangibly bring peace and wholeness to those around you today?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I do not want to live a life that just goes through the motions. I ask that today, and every day, you will breathe your eternal life into me, empowering me to live the life that is truly life. Amen.

### **Wednesday, April 4**

#### **Scripture: John 20:24-29**

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, "We've seen the Lord!" But he replied, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe." After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!" Thomas responded to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus replied, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

**Observation:** On Sunday evening, Jesus appeared to the hiding, frightened disciples and said, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). When Jesus "showed them his hands and his side" (verse 20), they believed he was alive. Thomas was not with them, and wouldn't take their word for it. Eight days later, Jesus showed himself to Thomas. As it did for Mary in the garden, the presence of his clearly-alive Lord overcame all of Thomas' doubt.

**Application:** In verse 29, Jesus said, "Happy are those who don't see and yet believe." This was not to shame Thomas, but to encourage all future believers. We cannot see Jesus the way the disciples did, but we can see Jesus working through others, and "hear" him speak to our heart as we read the Bible and sense his impact on our lives. Where have you seen Jesus at work lately? How can you help someone else see him?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, speak to me and through me. Give me a heart sensitive to your presence and attuned to listen to and share your inner voice. Amen.

### **Thursday, April 5**

#### **Scripture: Isaiah 2:2-4, 11:6-9, 65:17-19**

In the days to come the mountain of the LORD's house will be the highest of the mountains. It will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it. Many nations will go and say, "Come, let's go up to the LORD's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God so that he may teach us his ways

and we may walk in God's paths." Instruction will come from Zion; the LORD's word from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war.

The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze. Their young will lie down together, and a lion will eat straw like an ox. A nursing child will play over the snake's hole; toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den. They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD, just as the water covers the sea.

Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth: past events won't be remembered; they won't come to mind. Be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating, because I'm creating Jerusalem as a joy and her people as a source of gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad about my people. No one will ever hear the sound of weeping or crying in it again.

**Observation:** In Isaiah's day, conflict between the dominant Assyrian Empire and the military power of Egypt was a constant threat to Israel. (Like them, we at times feel as though we live with the threat of violence.) Isaiah's God-given vision was not of one power wiping out the others, but of swords made into plowshares. He wrote prophetically about God's dream of a world restored by the Messiah, a world where "they will neither harm nor destroy." He even used startling images to show us the serene nature of this new Eden. Imagine lambs lying down safely with lions, or children playing near cobras!

**Application:** As centuries rolled by, and swords were still swords, God's people realized their ultimate hope was in a world dramatically recreated by God's redeeming power. What inner tendencies do you, and the communities of which you are a part, need to move beyond before weapons are no longer necessary? How can you join God's work by seeking to make today's world a place where more people can live in peace and safety?

**Prayer:** O Lord, let your peace reign more and more in my heart, in my life. And keep my hope and faith focused on the day when you again reign fully over our world, and violence and sadness give way to complete peace and harmony. Amen.

## **Friday, April 6**

### **Scripture: Revelation 19:5-9, 21:1-6**

Then a voice went out from the throne and said, "Praise our God, all you his servants, and you who fear him, both small and great." And I heard something that sounded like a huge crowd, like rushing water and powerful thunder. They said, "Hallelujah! The Lord our God, the Almighty, exercised his royal power! Let us rejoice and celebrate, and give him the glory, for the wedding day of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. She was given fine, pure white linen to wear, for the fine linen is the saints' acts of justice." Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Favored are those who have been invited to the wedding banquet of the Lamb." He said to me, "These are the true words of God."

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with

them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." Then the one seated on the throne said, "Look! I'm making all things new." He also said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "All is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will freely give water from the life-giving spring.

**Observation:** Many people think Revelation is bleak and scary—but near its end, the vision pictured God's restored world as a joyous wedding banquet! (In Bible times, wedding banquets were an even bigger deal than today's receptions.) The vision rolled on to end in Paradise restored. With images from the prophet Isaiah as well as the Genesis creation stories, it showed the world as God meant it to be—no pain, suffering or death. In Revelation 21, "the one seated on the throne" made a resonant promise to our broken, hurting world: "I'm making all things new."

**Application:** Every day natural disasters, illnesses, some large or small part of the economy going south or the world scene getting more chaotic can make it feel as though the news is trying to snuff out hope. In whom do you place your confidence that "the worst thing is never the last thing"? Do you trust that Jesus meant it when he promised to prepare a place for us so that we can be with him forever (John 14:1-3)? Can you live in hope that, in the end, God will win?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, I yearn for the day when you will make all things new. Keep renewing me inside, empowering me to live with trust and hope in a world painfully short of both. Amen.

## **Saturday, April 7**

### **Scripture: Revelation 22:1-5, 17**

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, shining like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the city's main street. On each side of the river is the tree of life, which produces twelve crops of fruit, bearing its fruit each month. The tree's leaves are for the healing of the nations. There will no longer be any curse. The throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Night will be no more. They won't need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine on them, and they will rule forever and always.

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Let the one who hears say, 'Come!' And let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift."

**Observation:** Revelation, which began with the words "A revelation of Jesus Christ" (Revelation 1:1), rooted its vision of Eden restored in absolute faith in the risen Redeemer, in Easter. Unlike some philosophies, Christians do not see history as an unending cycle, but rather as a story moving to a grand and glorious conclusion. Revelation ended with a glowing, symbol-laden picture of the eternal glory God promises. A central symbol was God's restored gift of "the tree of life" (Genesis 2:9, 3:22-23), signifying God making right all that has gone wrong. And Jesus invited anyone who is thirsty for a better world to be there!

**Application:** The name of the tree of life tells us its essential meaning: it is an image of eternal or unending life. What do you most look forward to when God makes all things new? When you read, "Let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift" (Revelation 22:17), have you said "yes" to that invitation?

**Prayer:** Lord Jesus, this world makes me thirst for your life-giving water, and hunger for the healing fruit from the Tree of Life. Thank you for the rising from the dead, promising me that I will not have to hunger and thirst forever. Amen.