

The Lamb, the Gardener, and Universal Salvation

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Do you find it as interesting as I do that when Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning in John's Gospel, he takes the form of a *gardener*? You would think that Jesus might appear as, well, Jesus! Could there be some special significance to why he appears as a gardener in John's Gospel?

If you haven't discovered this by now, when it comes to Jesus, everything he does is significant. This is especially true in the Gospel of John. After all, it was written at least 20-30 years after Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written. Since these other gospels already existed, John's Gospel is less concerned with Jesus' history as he is with his historical significance. So, the Gospel of John is chock full of metaphors that point beyond themselves to higher realities. (E.g., "I am the Bread of Life"; "I am the Good Shepherd"; "I am the Vine"; etc., etc.)

Now, if I were writing John's Gospel and wanted to speak metaphorically about who Jesus is, I might have Jesus appear to Mary on Easter morning with a crown on his head, signifying that the resurrection proves that Jesus is our one true Lord. Or, I might adorn Jesus with priestly robes, signifying that Christ is the supreme mediator between ourselves and God. Then again, I might put priestly robes *and* a crown on him, signifying that Jesus is not only Lord and Priest, but was God's chosen Messiah.

Why does John portray Jesus first appearing to Mary as a Gardener?

By the way, even though none of the other Gospels include this curious story of Jesus appearing as a gardener, I actually don't rule out the possibility that Jesus actually did appear to Mary this way. I mean, if God can raise someone from the dead, then far be it from me to put limits on how Jesus might appear to someone!

Whatever the case may be, John's portrayal of Jesus appearing to Mary as a gardener is fraught with significance that would have been apparent to most ancient Christians, but seems almost entirely lost to the average person in modern times.

This morning, we're going to unravel the mystery.

As with any great mystery, the first clue one comes across rarely leads directly to the mystery's resolution. That would be no fun at all, would it? No, the first clue in a truly great mystery leads to ... an even greater mystery!

The first clue we find to the Jesus-as-Gardener mystery comes in the form of the painfully obvious questions Jesus asks Mary when she encounters Jesus on Easter morning. He asks Mary, “Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Pardon my irreverence, but Jesus’ questions seem like the stupidest questions in the entire Bible – or at very least, the most insensitive. Does Jesus seriously not know why Mary weeps, or who she’s frantically looking for when she comes across an empty tomb?

Yet, if you are familiar with the Gospel of John, you’ve heard Jesus’ second question before, “Who are you looking for?” These are *the very first words out of Jesus’ mouth* in John’s gospel, right there in Chapter 1. In other words, Jesus’ first words after his resurrection connect the story of Easter to the very first story of Jesus in John’s gospel. This is hardly coincidence!

The scene in the first chapter of John’s gospel unfolds someplace near the Jordan river. One day John the Baptist sees Jesus approaching him and declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” The next day, as John stands with two of his disciples, he spots Jesus again, exclaiming, “Look, here is *the lamb of God!*”

When the disciples of John the Baptist start following after Jesus, Jesus the “Lamb of God” turns around and asks the very question “Jesus the Gardner” asked Mary on Easter morning: “Who are you looking for?”

In response, John’s disciples exclaim, “Rabbi!” which in Hebrew means “My master.”

Funny, that’s the exact thing Mary exclaims when she finally recognizes Jesus for who he is on Easter morning. She cries out, “Rabbouni!” which in Aramaic means, “My master!”

Again, the connection is hardly coincidental.

Now we’re about ready to put the clues together about Jesus as Gardener. John has intentionally connected the story of Jesus the Gardner with Jesus the “Lamb of God.”

Mystery solved! No? Well, let’s remind ourselves of what the Lamb metaphor means – in all the Gospels, not just the Gospel of John. If you weren’t here last Sunday or for our Maundy Thursday Seder Service, this is what we found:

At the Last Supper, which was a Passover Seder according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke – or the day before Passover according to John – Jesus took bread and wine and said, “this is my body, broken for you”; and “this is the blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you.”

What Jesus is signifying in this gesture is that he is replacing the Passover Lamb *with himself*. In so doing, Jesus is reinterpreting the ancient story of Passover. In the ancient

story, God instructed the Israelite slaves in Egypt to slaughter a lamb and place its blood on their doorposts and lintels of their homes so that when God's Spirit came to slay the children of the Egyptians who refused to let the Israelites go after ten different warnings, that Spirit would "pass over" the innocent. The lamb's blood protected the Israelites from harm.

No matter what you think about this story and its violence, consider what it means when Jesus replaces the Passover lamb with himself. Who slaughtered Jesus, the "Lamb of God," on Good Friday and thus received protection from God's wrath? Not the innocent, but the guilty! Not "true believers" in Jesus, but the truest of deniers. If Jesus did not make this point clear enough by replacing himself with the Passover Lamb, he makes it even clearer on the Cross when he prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing."

If this act of Jesus doesn't blow your mind, I don't know what will. For, if Jesus reveals the heart of God's heart in some essential way, what he is revealing by replacing the Passover Lamb with himself, and allowing his blood to be shed by the Roman and Jewish leaders, is that God is no longer in the Wrath Business (if, indeed, God ever was). God is in the Forgiveness Business!

Jesus truly is what John the Baptist says he is: The "Lamb of God *who takes away the sins of the world.*"

Think about this for a moment. Think about what this kind of forgiveness says about you and your own relationship with God. Consider all that you have done, or failed to do, that might separate you from God, or warrant God punishing you? Now, consider what sins God intends to punish you for if Jesus reveals who God really is, and what God is really like – and Jesus forgives his own crucifiers ...

The apostle Paul knew what all this means for us. Remember, Paul had persecuted Christians until he himself encountered the Risen Christ, and found Christ to be loving and forgiving despite Paul's murderous actions. Paul writes,

*If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for **all** of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)*

Once this Reality of Christ our Passover really gets under a person's skin and sinks way down deep into the marrow of their bones, people tend to get quite happy! Happy, and ready to forgive others as they have been forgiven. So, they become not only unusually

happy but incredibly gracious and generous toward others. They start loving their enemies, doing good to those who hurt them, praying for those who persecute them.

You could say that such people become *transformed*. They become what Jesus calls a “New Creation.”

Now, that we know who Jesus the Lamb of God is, who is Jesus the *Gardener* of God?

Well, who is the most famous gardener in the history of the world? Surely, it is Adam (of the Adam and Eve story). The early church believed that Jesus was the Second Adam.

When Jesus appears to Mary as a Gardener, this is John’s way (perhaps even Jesus’ way) of indicating that Jesus is the Second Adam. He is the “new and improved” version of the first.

If the first Adam set humanity on the course of Destruction, Jesus was God’s course correction, setting us on the path of Redemption.

Once again, the apostle Paul was aware of the implications and what this means for us. He writes,

*“For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the **grace** of God and the free gift in the **grace** of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many ... just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”* (Romans 5:15, 18-19)

Whether the Bible calls Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,” or the Second Adam, who provides “justification and life for all,” what is being revealed in Christ Jesus is God’s intention is for each and every one of us to be transformed and redeemed. No one will be “left behind.”

“But wait,” you say. “You don’t mean to imply that the earliest Christians believed in Universal Salvation, do you?”

No, I do not mean to *imply* that they believed in Universal Salvation. I am stating unequivocally that they did! Not all Christians, of course. (When have Christians universally agreed on anything?)

Paul himself believed in Universal Salvation. That’s why you’ll find absolutely no reference to Hell in any of Paul’s letters. What good are the eternal fires of hell if hell is empty of occupants?

Other church leaders beyond the Bible wrote and spoke eloquently about Universal Salvation. Leaders like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus of Lyons, to name just a few.

You may wonder, if Jesus the Lamb of God and Second Adam reveals that God saves everyone in the end, then do our actions in this life really matter?

If you look at the first three centuries of the Early Church, it is clear that they certainly thought that Universal Salvation means our actions matter – and matter more than they did before they became believers.

After all, these early Christians were brutally persecuted. They were fired from their jobs. They were jailed. They were tortured. Many were killed in the most gruesome of ways. Yet, amazingly enough, throughout three full centuries of persecution, these very Christians remained resolutely non-violent. They returned hatred with love, violence with forgiveness, persecution with prayers for their persecutors.

These Christians believed that, if God loves everyone, they needed to love everyone, too. Universal Salvation meant that their actions needed to reflect what Jesus commanded in his Sermon on the Mount. Acting in this way resulted in so many Romans converting to Christianity that the Roman government couldn't possibly kill enough of us to keep up with the converts! After three centuries, the Roman Empire converted to the very religion it had persecuted – all without a single sword being raised by Christians. (Would that we act this way today!)

So yes, *of course* Universal Salvation means our actions matter. Universal Salvation makes our actions *more* important, not less.

Speaking of our actions, we have only solved half the mystery this morning concerning Jesus appearing as a Gardener. If Jesus is the Second Adam, you may wonder, is there a Second Eve?

Indeed, there is!

Mary Magdalene represents the Second Eve. Only, this is a metaphor, too. Mary represents God's plan for all who, like Mary, love Jesus. They are to become the Bride of Christ.

Don't you remember all those parables Jesus told about wedding feasts and bridegroom awaiting his bride, and all that talk in the early church about the church being the "Bride of Christ"?

Yes, Easter points us to Christ as the Second Adam, and Easter points to *all who love Jesus* as the Second Eve and Bride of Christ/

We're not there yet. We've got a lot of growing up to do if we are to become the Bride of Christ. But, the Good News of Easter is that we don't have to wait until we die to start the process of transformation. We just need to start loving others like we love Jesus, seeing them as every bit as much of God's plan for humanity as we are.

Not an easy task to be sure. Yet, through the Holy Spirit, we have an ongoing relationship with our Bridegroom that continues to refine us into the kind of Bride fit for best of marriages. We may not become that ideal bride by the time we leave this world, but the fact that Jesus was raised from death suggests that God has more time and relationship to work things out with us than we can imagine.

Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed.

Now, let's act like it!

Happy Easter.