



“Positive ID”

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John 20:1–18 (NRSV)***

Like the women who came early to the tomb on the first Easter morning, Allyn, Roberta, and Bartley made their way across the old Civil War cemetery that is now known as Beecher Park. They were wearing everyday clothes and carrying gardening tools.

To look at them, one might have never known that they were harbingers of hope and witnesses to the resurrection. On the surface of things, what most people knew about this triumvirate was that they were public school teachers, that Roberta and Allyn had inherited a nursery from Allyn’s parents, and that Bartley was a son in their “family of choice.”

When I encountered these ecclesiastical gardeners that warm spring morning, I learned that they had come to exhume the dead and to discern what had brought about the untimely demise of three magnificent hemlock shrubs that they had planted on the north side of the church the previous spring.

Hemlocks, they thought, were supposed to be hearty enough to withstand a New York winter—but apparently not. The signs of death were all around them. Great gobs of needles dropped from each branch as Allyn brushed the boughs and moved the branches around to see if anything was salvageable. In the end, they pronounced the hemlocks dead, and resolved to cut them down, pull out the stumps, and start over. And so that’s what they did.

I surveyed the gardeners’ work from some distance, for fear of breaking out in hives. (I’m allergic to all things evergreen.) While I watched and listened, a family of three approached, including a mother, Mary, father, Bill, and pre-teen daughter named Ingrid. They stopped on the sidewalk and asked what we were doing. I explained. They nodded. We didn’t seem to bite. They asked more questions.

“Do you know what kind of church this is?” the mother asked.

“Why, yes, I do,” I replied. “This is the United Church of Christ.”

The title meant nothing to her or to any of them. I was not surprised. I've spent my whole life explaining the history and identity of the United Church of Christ. I went on to offer a thumbnail description of our heritage, and the social ministry that we have been engaged in.

Finally, the mother, Mary, said, "It's impressive that you know so much about the church."

"Thank you," I said, "I'd better. I'm the pastor."

Mary was flabbergasted, and said, "Oh my goodness, I didn't realize. Excuse me. I thought you were the gardeners."

"Please," I said, "don't apologize. To be mistaken as the gardener is the highest praise in the Christian faith. According to John's gospel, the resurrected Christ was mistaken as the gardener."

II

The way that John tells the Easter story, Mary Magdalene went early to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial. This preparation was an act of love and a traditional form of burial practice in first-century Palestine.

After she arrived at the cemetery, Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. Eventually she screwed up her courage and went in, and there she saw two angels sitting where the body had been laid.

The angels asked her, "Why are you weeping?"

She said to them, "Somebody has stolen my Jesus, and I do not know where they have laid him." Then she turned around and saw someone standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

The man said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?"

Supposing Jesus to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried Jesus away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take his body away."

Then Jesus called out her name, "Mary!"

And, finally, she realized that the one whom she had thought was the gardener was her rabbi—her teacher—the resurrected Christ.

III

As you may be aware, there are several versions of the Easter story in the New Testament. Each of the four gospels tells the story differently, and the gospel of Luke links Easter with the Acts of the Apostles, which depicts the Church as the resurrected body of Christ. Some find this variety perplexing. I find it delightful. Among other things, this variety canonizes the validity of the scriptures' multi-vocal character, and teaches us to honor diversity within the Bible and diversity in terms of Biblical interpretation.

I don't have a favorite Easter story, but there are things about each version that I particularly enjoy.

My favorite part of John's Easter story, for example, is his emphasis on garden imagery, and how Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for a gardener. This association between Jesus and the gardener is natural, I think. There's so much about working in a garden that helps many of us connect with the Easter story, metaphorically, if not literally. For example, there's the whole cycle of life that we experience in the garden, the enjoyment we gain from being part of God's creative process, and the mystery of that growth which we can observe, but that only God can engender.

While it is true that only God can create vegetation, it is also true that each of us can be gardeners on some small or even grand scale, and that by doing so we can become witnesses and agents of the Easter hope.

One local way to be agents of the Easter hope is by supporting ag-related jobs programs like "Dig Deep" Farms, which we featured at Eden Church last Sunday. We can also be windowsill gardeners. Some of us have or can raise kitchen gardens or gardens in our backyards. If we don't have land that we can till, we can participate in community garden projects, like the Hayward Community Gardens or the raised beds project at the Castro Valley Senior Center. And, soon, if we are so inclined, we can also become urban farmers.

I realize that "urban farming" sounds like an oxymoron. I can't wait to tell all my farming relatives that I'm preaching about urban farming today. They will probably laugh themselves silly when they hear these words coupled together: urban farming.

Silly as it may sound to them, it's true. There's a new, old-fashioned idea returning to the unincorporated area in South Alameda County and to the City of Hayward called urban farming.

One promising approach is called a Sustainable Commercial Urban Farm Incubator, or "SCUFI," that is being pioneered by, among others, Virtually Green, a Berkley-based urban farming venture. Here's how Virtually Green describes their program:

The SCUFI program trains aspiring commercial urban farmers, assists with startup financing, helps secure land and provides technical and business support

to urban farmers. SCUFI program sites are getting underway across the country. Two of the first are in Concord and Hayward, California.

Sustainable commercial urban farms can be profitably operated . . . that may total less than an acre.

[They] . . . can be established on fertile urban soils, on impervious surfaces (such as parking lots, demolished building concrete pads, or rooftops), or [even] on brownfields.

Sustainable commercial urban farms can [also] be profitably integrated into structures, grounds, and systems of new or existing buildings and neighborhoods.

[They] can provide major financial, environmental and social benefits for property developers, owners, operators, tenants, and their neighborhoods.

[And they] can strengthen the proformas, ROI, valuation, and triple-bottom-line performance of most any building, especially green building and sustainable development projects such as LEED or Living Building Challenge.

Sara Lamnin, a leader at Congregation Shir Ami, and the director of Hayward Community Action Network (HCAN) and the Hayward Planning Council, has been on the leading edge of this urban farming project in the City of Hayward.

IV

Some other promising approaches for our area include the promotion of organic gardening, and “SPIN farming.” Both efforts are being promoted by the Ashland Cherryland Garden and Arts Network, under the leadership of Susan Beck. I think most of us are familiar with at least the concepts of organic kitchen gardening, and many of you have likely seen the ACGAAN’s literature around our church. We’ve been promoting these programs for over a year now.

But SPIN farming is a new concept to many of us. It is being promoted both by the ACGAAN and by Dig Deep Farms. “SPIN” stands for “Small Plot INTensive farming.” SPIN-Farming is a non-technical, easy-to-learn and inexpensive-to-implement vegetable farming system that also makes it possible to earn significant income from land bases under an acre in size.¹

SPIN farming is being practiced by first-generation farmers because it removes the two big barriers to economic development—and capital—and can be implemented as well by established farmers who want to diversify or downsize, or by people who are looking to be part-time hobby farmers.

¹ U<http://www.spinfarming.com/whatsSpin/U>

If you are interested in learning about SPIN farming, you can register to take classes right here at Eden Church. The classes will be organized and offered in June and July under the aegis of Garden and Arts Network. Eden Church is serving as a co-sponsor of these classes, and is providing discounted meeting space in order to keep the overhead costs low and to help bring this economic development program to our community.

There are several advantages to both the SCUFI and SPIN models of urban farming for our area, such as these:

1. Urban farming improves diet and nutrition among local residents who do not have easy access to grocery stores.
2. Urban farms produce healthier food for our community, by using organic agricultural methods that do not rely on harmful pesticides and fertilizers.
3. They reduce the carbon footprint of the agricultural industry by using manual labor rather than fossil fuels to till, plant, harvest, and transport produce.
4. Urban farms create jobs and enhance economic sustainability for our neighborhood.
5. They produce fresh fruits and vegetables for local homeless shelters, food banks, and WIC programs, so that those who cannot afford to buy produce can enjoy better nutrition and health; and
6. Urban farms build on the inherent strengths and reinforce the assets and structures of immigrant farming families that reside in our community.

V

Perhaps the most exciting news of all, in this flurry of urban agriculture emerging in our area, is the prospect of a cooperative market coming to our neighborhood. The vision for this cooperative, called Mandela Marketplace, is that it would be constructed in Cherryland, and would provide a commercial outlet for the organic produce grown in our area.

The current vision for the market involves the construction of mixed-use commercial space that would combine affordable housing with retail space, where—in addition to an affordable grocery store—demonstration gardens would be tilled, and vendors with complementary business objectives could lease retail space.

Draft architectural plans for the development of the site of the former Hayward Auto Dealership (at Mission and Maddox) were unveiled at the Cherryland Stakeholders meeting this past Wednesday evening at Eden Church. The exact plans for the site are yet to be defined, and will be developed through a series of town hall meetings in the next few months.

I want to personally thank the members of our church who live in Cherryland and who have made a special effort to participate in the marketing studies that we hosted recently in support of Mandela Marketplace.

I also want to thank our Board of Trustees and the members of our staff who regularly provide the hustle and hospitality that makes it possible for Eden Church to serve as a seedbed for these and other community initiatives that are revitalizing the Eden area.

In the days and weeks ahead, we will be hearing more about ways that we can become more involved in the greening of Eden. And as we do, we may very well be mistaken for gardeners—which is another way of saying that we can become witnesses to and agents of the Easter hope, for the glory of God and the wellbeing of our community. Amen.