

Homily, Stephen Crippen, Good Friday, 4-15-2022, 1

Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered.

He brings us back into the garden.

What will we find there?

A thousand thousand *flowers*: riots of color, rushes of fragrance. The intensity of goodness can be stunning. Someone forgave you, and you're almost knocked off your feet by the relief. Or someone asked *your* forgiveness, and your faith in human strength and integrity is restored. Someone is born, and you can hardly breathe for the joy. Someone is found; someone is embraced; someone has come home. Or someone is baptized. Oh, the gladness I feel about our four baptisms this Sunday. I want to shout about it. I am fit to burst.

There are still other joyful flowers in the garden. There's the thrill of infatuation, the delight of the chase, the brilliant flash and splendid fury of passionate love. And there's another kind of thrilling love: after twenty, thirty, for some couples more than *seventy* years, you find that you and your beloved are *family*, forever, and the goodness fills you like steel-cut oatmeal and strong hot coffee in the morning. Now that I think about it, maybe that kind of lifelong love is not a flower; maybe that is a *tree*, in God's garden.

But then there are the delightful hybrid flowers: joy shot through with sadness and anxiety, like when your child goes to college for the first time. Relief tinted with the shadow of anger, like when you retrieve your stray dog from the street. Love that sparks to life in vigorous argument; intimacy that traces the boundaries of your shyness, and playfully crosses them; or just the favorite complex emotion of Truvy in the movie *Steel Magnolias*, played with uncomplicated joy by Dolly Parton: Truvy's favorite emotion is laughter through tears.

But what else do you find in the garden, led back there today by Jesus?

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We will walk on, lean on, stumble on, and weep upon *rocks*: rocks with sharp edges, rocks underfoot on crunchy walking paths, rocky benches for resting, headstones for mourning, a rock serving as Jacob's makeshift pillow – uncomfortable, but better than nothing after his long journey. The rocky challenges in God's garden can be daunting. The gravel path stretches long, or winds sharply, and we wonder why we came here, where we're really heading, why we chose this partner, why that friend can be so hard, why we still can't seem to overcome our own shortcomings, why this time in our lives – and this time on the planet – has so many hard edges, edges that trip us, edges that cut us. The names of our beloved dead are etched in the rock, and we hope they can hear us, wherever they are – how long have they been dead now? Some of them have been gone almost as long as we knew them when they were alive. At some point it will be longer.

And then, of course, in the garden, we will find *serpents*. The slithering rustle of deception, the bitter venom of betrayal. The reptilian monster that lurks within you, within me, waiting to strike with surprising vigor. Only later – too late – do we feel the sickening crush of regret.

In this garden there is yet another viper who has bitten countless Christians down the centuries, filling them with the poison of anti-semitism, twisting today's Passion story and its reference to "the Jews," souring this story of perfect love with anti-Jewish hatred. Whenever we proclaim this story – every single time – we must state clearly that this grievous sin is ours to confess.

But then there is the dull snake of selfishness, the worm of easy answers, while so many people in this garden cry out for justice. The Ghost of Christmas Present introduces two characters to Ebenezer Scrooge: their names are Want and Ignorance. They are children, but their youth – their innocence – has been robbed from them, so they are grotesque, frail, wizened. Scrooge meets them as he contemplates the present time: in the garden, *right now*, lurk Want and Ignorance,

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back-breaking poverty and all the wretched ignorance that causes it, that has so damaged the human spirit, marking some humans for death, but not others.

There are less severe stingers in the garden, too: nettles and other prickly plants, the little annoyances that wear down a friendship, the microaggressions, the miniscule irritants that work your last nerve and can sometimes spark startling rage. They add up.

God help us, in this beautiful but fearsome garden.

Oh, but God *does* help us here. God in Jesus takes us back into the garden, the same one that Eve and Adam, the human ones, have left, will leave, have always been leaving. We humans may often feel thrown out of the garden: wounded by snakes and bloody from walking barefoot on the rocks of grief, it's easy to think we just got chucked out. The flowers fade and the gardeners come through to dead-head them. I am capable of making mistakes that would end my life as I know it, and damage other lives, too. All of us are vulnerable, in so many ways. And *culpable*, too.

Yet Jesus takes us back into the garden.

And there, in God's garden, Jesus is fatally bitten by a serpent, by *the* serpent, by all serpents. There he is fastened with nails to the Tree of Life, and there his blood warms and fertilizes the ground. There he dies, and perhaps all seems lost – just another senseless death of an innocent, just another dull story of an empire squashing a rebel like a tiny garden insect.

Most of the friends Jesus took with him back into the garden have fled, but not all. Some women stay to the end, and today we watch as Jesus binds his mother to the disciple he loved so dearly, so intimately: this trio – a mother, her son, and his beloved – they have cultivated many

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fragrant flowers in God's garden. And they have helped each other with the rocks and the dangerous beasts.

We are meant to understand that we, you and I, and really all the humans in God's garden, gathered today but also scattered today, and particularly those who at this hour are in grave peril – we are meant to understand that *all of us* are the beloved disciple. And so Jesus loves *us* with astonishing intensity. Jesus takes *us* back into this lush garden, with all of its rocky paths, and yes, with all of its dreadful serpents. Jesus takes us back in. He takes all the worst in the garden, and asks only that we be with him, and even more importantly, be bound to one another. “Here is your mother,” Jesus says to us, just before he hands over the Spirit into this garden. “Your mother”: who is she? She is your neighbor, your child, your enemy, your lover, your friend, the stranger: “Here they are,” Jesus says, and then he says, “They are yours.”

As he dies, Jesus binds us together, inside this garden.

And finally, one of us in the garden has written this for our hearing:

Now there was a garden in the place where Jesus was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Even in death, Jesus remains in the garden. His body rests among the serpents, among the rocks, among the flowers and trees.

Rest here, on your stone pillow. Pause on a rocky bench. Let someone nurse your snakebite, and soothe your feet. Offer your own healing wisdom to your injured neighbor. Resurrection life is already surging up from the earth. And even now, the words of Jesus are still echoing along the path, and wafting with delicious fragrance among the flower beds. Even now, we can hear him saying,

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“Here, here is your mother.”

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Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Psalm 22

Hebrews 4:14-16;5:7-9

John 18:1-19:42