

Garden Tomb

Based on John 19:41-42, 20:1-18

"Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him.'" — John 20:15

SERMON SUMMARY

This Easter sermon began not with the resurrection but with the Bible itself — a book that is actually 66 books, written by roughly 40 authors over 1,500 years, across three continents and three languages. A researcher from Carnegie Mellon mapped over 63,000 cross-references within its pages, and the resulting image looks like a single, intricately woven story. That is exactly what it is.

This sermon was the final chapter in a Lenten series tracing one thread of that story: the garden. We began in Eden, where life was given and rebellion began. We passed through Egypt, a royal garden, a poetic garden, a garden of exile, the garden of Gethsemane — and now we arrive at Easter, where the story reaches its climax. In a garden, death is defeated. In a garden, a woman mistakes the risen Lord of the universe for the groundskeeper.

The Scene: Easter Begins in the Dark

John's Easter account opens with a deliberately theological detail: it was still dark when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. This is not merely a time stamp. John's Gospel begins with "In the beginning was the Word" and speaks of light shining in darkness. By the time of the crucifixion, it appears the darkness has won. So Easter, in John's telling, begins not in triumphant dawn but in darkness — the darkness of the world, of the disciples' hearts, of Mary's grief.

Mary is not a minor character. She had followed Jesus from village to village after he cast seven demons out of her. She had walked all the way to the cross when the disciples fled. She had watched him die. Now, broken by that death, she comes to do the one final thing she can — honor his body — and even that has been taken from her. John uses the same word for her weeping that he uses for the mourning at Lazarus's tomb: not quiet tears, but loud, heaving grief.

John 20:1-2 "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw the stone had been removed from the entrance."

The Mistaken Identity

The scene that follows moves quickly — Mary running, Peter and John racing to the tomb, the folded burial cloth, the disciples returning home uncomprehending. Then the pace slows to a single frame: Mary, alone, weeping outside the tomb.

Angels appear and ask a strange question for a graveyard: "Woman, why are you crying?" She answers with the same words she had given the disciples — someone has taken the body, and she doesn't know where. Then she turns, and Jesus is standing there. She does not recognize him. He asks the same question the angels asked, and adds one more: "Who is it you are looking for?"

She mistakes him for the gardener. The sermon offered a contextual explanation for this: she was standing in a garden. John tells us the place of crucifixion contained a garden, and in that garden, a new tomb. A stranger speaking to a woman in a garden tomb in early morning — of course she assumes he tends the grounds. It is the most reasonable conclusion. And in that reasonable mistake, we have history's most profound case of mistaken identity.

John 20:15-16 "Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'"

Who Are We Looking For?

The sermon used this mistaken identity as a mirror, asking: who do we misidentify Jesus as today? The question Jesus asks Mary — "Who is it you are looking for?" — is the same question he asks at the garden of Gethsemane (twice) and the same one he asks us.

The sermon named several contemporary misidentifications. Some see Jesus as a political mascot — reshaped to look like whatever ideology currently holds power, whether left or right. Some see him as a moral philosopher — even an atheist New Testament scholar recently published a book arguing that Jesus' teachings transformed Western ethics, inventing hospitals, orphanages, and care for the poor. High praise — and still a misidentification. Some see him as the star of a religious spectacle, a tool for producing powerful experiences and big crowds. And some, more personally, carry a misidentified Jesus with them everywhere: the genie who grants wishes if we say the right words, the buddy who never challenges us, or the angry parent we can never satisfy.

Recognition: He Calls Us By Name

Mary does not recognize Jesus by seeing him clearly. She recognizes him when he speaks her name. "Mary." One word. And she turns.

The sermon drew out the profound logic here: the only way to correctly identify Jesus is to first be identified by him. We can only know him truly when we recognize that he already knows us truly — that he has numbered the hairs of our heads, that before the foundation of the world he knew us by name, that every day of our lives was written in his book before one of them came to be. It is when the Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name that they recognize his voice.

Her response — "Raboni!" — means simply "Teacher." Not the highest title available to her. But it is the right one in that moment, because what she is remembering is everything he taught. And his teaching was full of soil and seeds, vines and weeds, gardens and growth.

John 10:3-4 "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."

The Deeper Truth: He Was Always the Gardener

Here the sermon made its most beautiful turn. Mary's mistake, it turns out, was not entirely wrong. Scholars note that John's Passion narrative forms a deliberate arc — beginning in the garden of Gethsemane and ending in the garden tomb. And what has God been doing across all of Scripture? Gardening.

- In Genesis 2, God plants a garden in the east and places humanity within it.
- In Numbers 24, Israel is compared to gardens beside a river, planted by the Lord.

- In Psalm 80, God brings a vine out of Egypt, clears the ground, and plants it.
- In Jeremiah 24, God says of the exiles: "I will plant them and not uproot them."
- In Isaiah 53, the Messiah grows up "like a tender shoot... like a root out of dry ground."
- In John 12, Jesus says: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."
- In John 15, Jesus says: "I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener."

Jesus is the second Adam — sent to do what the first Adam failed to do. Adam's task was to till and keep the garden. Jesus, the new Adam, comes to bring the chaos of fallen creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvest.

The sermon closed with Rembrandt's famous painting of this scene — Jesus depicted not in royal robes but wearing a gardener's floppy hat, holding a spade, a pruning hook at his belt. Rembrandt was not depicting a mistake. He was depicting a truth. And that image — the Lord of the universe with dirt under his fingernails, tending the garden he loves — is the most beautiful picture of what the risen Christ is still doing today.

John 15:1-2 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

Key Takeaway

Mary's mistaken identity was wrong at one level and deeply right at another. Jesus is the gardener — the new Adam, tending the garden of his new creation, calling each of us by name, pruning what doesn't belong, nurturing what does. We are part of the garden he is growing. Easter is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the new one.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Take your time. Listen well to each other. There are no wrong answers — only honest ones.

1

The sermon opened with the image of 66,000 connections in Scripture forming one woven story. How does it affect your reading of the Bible to see it as a single, authored narrative rather than a collection of ancient writings? Does that feel true to you?

2

John tells us Easter begins "while it was still dark" — a theological statement, not just a time stamp. When in your own life has faith had to exist in the dark, before any dawn appeared? What did that season feel like?

3

Mary had followed Jesus for years, witnessed his miracles, stood at the cross — and still mistook him for the gardener. What does it say to you that even deep devotion and personal sacrifice are not enough to guarantee we see Jesus clearly?

4

The sermon named several ways we misidentify Jesus today: political mascot, moral philosopher, wish-granting genie, affirming buddy, impossible-to-please parent. Which of these resonates most with a version of Jesus you have encountered — either in yourself or in the culture around you?

5

Recognition came for Mary not through seeing but through hearing her name spoken. Have there been moments in your life when you felt genuinely known by God — not just believed in him, but felt specifically known? What was that like?

6

The sermon traced the gardener imagery through Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and John's Gospel — showing that God has always been the one doing the tending. How does it change your perspective on a difficult or pruning season of life to see it as the work of the gardener rather than random suffering?

7

The chaplain quoted in the sermon described his favorite image of Easter as Jesus "caught gardening" — palms pressed into the dust of a world he loves. What does that image stir in you? What does it mean for how you understand the risen Christ's activity in the world today?

LIVING IT OUT

The gardener has called us by name. Now we are invited to grow where he has planted us — and to join him in his work.

In Your Inner Life

- Read John 20:1-18 slowly this week — once on your own and, if possible, once aloud with someone. Pay attention to the details: the darkness, the running, the weeping, the folded cloth, the name. Let the story be strange and particular again, not just familiar.
- Sit with the question Jesus asks Mary: "Who is it you are looking for?" Turn it inward this week. Write down your honest answer. Is the Jesus you are looking for the real one, or a version shaped by your fears, your wishes, or your culture?
- The sermon said we can only recognize Jesus when we recognize that he already knows us. Spend time this week with Psalm 139 — the great psalm of being fully known. Let it be a prayer rather than just a reading.

In Your Closest Relationships

- Mary recognized Jesus when he called her by name. This week, practice the act of truly naming the people around you — not just greeting them, but seeing them. Call someone by name when you pray for them out loud. Tell someone specifically what you see in them that is good.
- The gardener prunes what doesn't belong so that what remains can bear more fruit. Is there a pattern, habit, or dynamic in one of your close relationships that you sense needs pruning? Bring it honestly to God this week, and consider whether it needs a conversation.
- Share the image of Jesus as gardener — or the image of Rembrandt's painting — with someone in your household or a close friend. Talk together about what it means for how you see the risen Christ's presence in your ordinary life.

In Your Daily Life and Work

- The sermon described Jesus in Rembrandt's painting with a spade in hand and a pruning hook at his belt — working, tending, present. This week, look for evidence of the gardener at work in the details of your daily life: a relationship being slowly restored, a character quality slowly growing, a grief slowly composting into something new.
- Jesus used soil and seeds and vines in his teaching because they tell the truth about how growth works: slowly, invisibly, through death before life. Is there an area of your life where you need to trust the slow work of the gardener rather than demanding visible results quickly?
- The sermon said the gardener is "using us as his gardeners too" — we are his means of spreading gospel hope. This week, ask God to show you one person in your life in whom he is at work, and ask how you might participate in what he is doing in them.

In Your Faith Community

- The sermon began with the astonishing unity of Scripture — 66 books, 40 authors, 1,500 years, one story. Find one way this week to connect a passage you know well to another part of the biblical story. Share that connection with someone in your church or small group.
- If you are in a season of pruning — something being cut away, something dying before it can grow — tell someone in your community about it. You do not have to carry it alone, and the gardener works through the body as well as in private.
- Easter is not a single day. Consider continuing the practice of reading the resurrection accounts across the coming weeks, noticing the details you have rushed past before.

A Word to Carry

He is not in the tomb. He is in the garden. Palms pressed into the dust of a world he loves, calling each of us by name, tending what he planted, pruning what doesn't belong. You are part of the garden he is growing. He knows your name.

SERVICE CHALLENGE

The gardener tends carefully, personally, and without fanfare. This week, we join him — not in spectacular gestures, but in quiet, faithful acts of cultivation.

This Week's Challenge: Go and Tell

Mary's first act after recognizing Jesus was not to stay and hold on. It was to go and tell. "I have seen the Lord." That is still the first act of everyone who has truly encountered him.

Step 1 — Name Someone.

Think of one person in your life who does not yet know the risen Jesus — or who once did and has drifted away. Write their name down. They are the person you are going to tell.

Step 2 — Go.

Make contact this week — in person, by phone, by note. You do not need a prepared speech. Mary's message was five words: "I have seen the Lord." What is your version of that? What has Jesus done in your life that you could say simply and honestly?

Step 3 — Tend Something.

Alongside the person you named, identify one place in your neighborhood or community that needs tending — a practical need, an act of service, a moment of presence with someone isolated or grieving. Do it without announcement. Gardeners work quietly.

Step 4 — Offer to Pray.

Before you leave or end the conversation, ask: "Can I pray for you?" Keep it brief and honest. Let them hear someone who has met the gardener speaking to him on their behalf.

Step 5 — Come Back and Share.

If you're in a small group or Sunday school class, come ready to share briefly what happened. Not results — just faithfulness. The gardener tends the growth. We tend the relationship.

Optional Extended Challenge

- Look up Rembrandt's painting "Noli Me Tangere" (or another artistic depiction of this Easter scene) and spend time with it. What do you notice? What does the artist see in Jesus that strikes you? Bring what you observe to a conversation with someone this week.
- The chaplain quoted in the sermon sees the worst of human darkness in his work with the Royal Mounted Police. This week, pray specifically for someone in your community whose daily work brings them face to face with suffering — a first responder, a social worker, a hospital worker, a pastor. Reach out and tell them you are praying.
- Plant something — literally, if you are able. A seed, a houseplant, a garden bed. As you tend it over the coming weeks, let it be a physical reminder that the gardener is at work: slow, patient, faithful, bringing life from death.

Closing Prayer Guide

Whether you're using this in a group or on your own, close by praying through these four things:

- Give thanks — that the tomb is empty, that the gardener is alive, that the darkness did not win, and that he has called each of us by name.
- Confess honestly — the ways we have misidentified Jesus, shaped him in our own image, or looked for something from him that is less than who he truly is.
- Ask to be known before asking to know — pray that by his Spirit you would hear your name spoken, and that in that hearing you would recognize him more clearly.
- Pray for the person you named in the service challenge — and for the courage to go and tell.

"Mary's intuitive guess that he must be the gardener was wrong at one level, and right — deeply right — at another."