

**Easter:  
Gardening as a Spiritual Practice for Earth-Care  
Rev. Dr. Robert Shore-Goss<sup>1</sup>**

*“...or speak to the earth, and it will teach you.” -- Job 12:8*

Gardens have been sacred spaces for many religions. For Islam, there are three gardens: the garden of Creation or Eden, the gardens of this world, and the Paradise garden at the resurrection of the dead. The Buddha was enlightened in a grove under a Bo tree in Bodhgaya, and he preached his first sermon ever in Deer Park. Japanese Zen Gardens have become a familiar landscape in American botanical gardens. The etymology for the ancient Avestan (Persian) word “Paradise” (*pairidaēza*) means orchard or a hunting park.

The Jesus movement became an urban movement within three years after the death and resurrection of Christ. It forgot its garden and rural roots and when it was propelled into an imperial religion under Constantine, when urban Christians stood against pagans (*paganus*, Latin for rustic or country-dweller). Christians as they expanded throughout Europe during the late Roman period and in the Early Middle Ages cut down the trees of sacred groves of competing indigenous religions. It forgot that Jesus’ burial tomb was in a garden.

I love our church garden, it is surprise in an urban setting with desert landscape and indigenous California plants. I sit in the garden for prayer each day, often with my companion dog, Friskie. He loves the garden fragrances and enjoys chasing the birds and eating the bird seed. The garden teaches me about abundant life, the language of grace. I share this reflection with you at Easter as a time to re-covenant ourselves as individuals and churches to Earth-care and environmental justice, for me the Earth is one of God’s gardens.

The first truth about gardens is that they are created; they are relational. In Genesis 2, we have the primal myth about God and gardens. It is metaphorical history that speaks about a grace relationship between God, gardens, and ourselves. Unlike the first chapter of the priestly account of creation in Genesis 1, where God speaks creation into existence, the Yahwist poet communicates that God didn’t speak the garden into

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existence but knelt down and fashioned a garden it out of dirt and placed our primal ancestors in the garden to live and care for the garden. It was a graced God's space, but we alienated ourselves from the garden. This is perhaps more truth than myth about contemporary humanity in the last two centuries as we have further disconnected ourselves from nature and gardens. For myself and many of the congregants, our garden is God's graced space, and it grew of our decision to make the Earth a member of our church and our hope to restore our connection to the Earth. We have a remarkable garden in the urban space of North Hollywood. It is landscaped with flowers and indigenous California plants but also includes vegetables that we harvest and share with church members. Our folks tour the garden before services to witness the latest blooms and sit in the garden to talk after service.

Our garden is truly a gift, literally because every plant has been donated by members, by stakeholders using our facility, and even by strangers. Gardens are gifts of natural beauty, with an abundant network of life. Gardens are works of art intended to be enjoyed.<sup>2</sup> We co-live with them and participate in them whether as gardeners or visitors. We have a relationship with a garden whether we cultivate and care for the plants or are a visitor meditating and enjoying the garden.

I have watched our church gardener for years, tenderly caring for each plant, watering, pruning, planting or transplanting, fertilizing, mulching, or enjoying. It is his spirituality, and he communicates with and listens to each plant. Our gardener is a member of our pastoral team, and he takes seriously that he has a pastoral responsibility to the Earth since we made the Earth a member of our congregation. He listens to the plants in the garden and is attentive to their needs. I commented to him several weeks ago how much his listening skills and compassionate care for congregants have matured with remarkable attentiveness and kindness to church members. I attribute this growth in pastoral skills to his listening and attentiveness to life in the garden. The garden has provided him with a pedagogy of listening and care, transferable also congregants.

The second truth about gardens is that they create a holy place where the sacred and nature come together. I experienced profound truth that God loves gardens and creates gardens. Dorothy Francis Gurney writes, "One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth."<sup>3</sup> Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw also observes, "The best place to seek God is in a garden."<sup>4</sup> How many of us now find God in our own gardens, church gardens, botanical or urban gardens, or the wilderness gardens of the Earth? I treasure my daily prayer time in our garden, often spent with my companion dog.

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<sup>2</sup> Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Garden of God: A Theological Cosmology*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Francis Gurney, "God's Garden" lines 13–16, *Poems, by Dorothy Frances Gurney*, London: Country Life, 1913.

<sup>4</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, Dodd, Mead & Co., 1933, 51.

Early Christians grasped the depth of meaning of the garden scene between the risen Christ and Magdalene. They understood that God is a gardener, for God began the gardening process of creation, and God the Gardener is lost in a kind of revelry or enjoyment on the Sabbath in Genesis. Since the garden is so lovely and so interesting, there is no other place that God wants to be, for God wants to attend to the garden and the gardeners. God's hands are dirty from garden care fashioning and creating. In the poetry of the book of Genesis, God the Gardener takes clay, breathes into clay, and fashions the first earthling--*adamah*. Dr. Daniel Hillel, a soil physicist, observes that the feminine Hebrew noun *adamah* indicates humanity's origin and humanity's destiny. In other words, we are tethered to the Earth from beginning of our lives to the end of our days.<sup>5</sup> This is a profound truth of earthly embodiment and foreshadowing our destiny to return to the Earth until we resurrected from Earth tomb as plants arises from the soil.

Of note in Genesis 2, God takes human beings and places them in a garden, and it is paradise because it is the place where humans can walk, talk, and intimately meet God in a graced space, and we can enjoy the beauty of the garden together. Hillel writes,

The ancient Hebrew association of man with soil is echoed in the Latin name for man, *homo*, derived from *humus*, the stuff of life in the soil. This powerful metaphor suggests an early realization of a profound truth that humanity has since disregarded to its own detriment. Since the words "humility" and "humble" also derive from *humus*, it is rather ironic that we should have assigned our species so arrogant a name as *Homo sapiens sapiens* ("wise wise man"). It occurs to me, as I ponder our past and future relation to the earth, that we might consider changing our name to a more modest *Homo sapiens curans*, with the word *curans* denoting caring or caretaking, as in "curator." ("Teach us to care" was T.S. Eliot's poetic plea.) Of course, we must work to deserve the new name, even as we have not deserved the old one.<sup>6</sup>

Gardens provide not only a Sabbath delight to God but also to ourselves because they are created space for intimate encounters that have been made fragrant to the smell and pleasurable to our senses. We have two primary relationships to a garden—actually as care-taking or as visitor invited to take care and preserve the garden. God loves and takes delight in gardens whether it is the immense garden that we describe as universe or the smaller Earth garden named Eden. And I understand this mystery as I and others sit in our meditation garden to pray and meet God or meet Christ each other in the garden while we share refreshments and conversations on a Sunday morning.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Hillel, *Out of the Earth: Civilization and the Life of the Soil*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Czechoslovakian writer and gardener Karel Apek writes the following in his lovely book *The Gardener's Year*. He describes a gardener, but I want you this Easter to imagine that he is speaking about God the Gardener.

I will now tell you how to recognize a real gardener. "You must come to see me," she says; "I will show you my garden." Then, when you go just to please her, you find her with her rump sticking up somewhere among the perennials. "I will come in a moment," she shouts to you over her shoulder. "Just wait till I have planted this rose." "Please don't worry," you say kindly to her. After a while she must have planted it; for she gets up, makes your hand dirty, and beaming with hospitality she says: "Come and have a look; it's a small garden, but ----- Wait a moment," and she bends over a bed to weed some tiny grass. "Come along. I will show you *Dianthus musalae*; it will open your eyes. Great Scott, I forgot to loosen it here!" she says, and begins to poke in the soil. A quarter of an hour later she straightens up again. "Ah," she says, "I wanted to show you that bell flower, *Campanula Wilsonae*. That is the best campanula which ----- Wait a moment, I must tie up this delphinium . . ." <sup>7</sup>

In the above description, I enjoy the delightful image of God as a female Gardener, poking, tilling, fussing, watering, fertilizing, and tenderly caring and fussing over her garden with a wonderful hat. As I earlier claimed, gardens are pure gift. We receive them as networks of abundant life, and they are places of life-giving beauty—splashes of color, designs that still our soul, and intoxicating scents that incite enjoyment. They still storms of raging emotions for a few moments, and they center us on beauty of life and the one who has graciously given life. For myself, our garden teaches me about God's grace, it is a convergence of the scripture of the natural world and our written scripture. It speaks of resurrected life of Easter grace and God's beauty.

Now Golgotha, the place of the skull, where Jesus was crucified and others were murdered by the Romans, was not far from the garden tomb, where the crucified Jesus was laid to rest. Golgotha was near the garbage or refuse heap of Jerusalem. In reflecting on our garden, I have grown to understand Golgotha as composter, a place of death where God uses the compost of Jesus to raise Jesus up from the garden tomb and bring new life to the Garden of the Earth.

On Easter morning, Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the empty tomb in the garden, and she found no emotional peace in the garden. She spoke her emotional anguish and grief to one she thought was a worker in the garden. Jesus appears to her in the garden, symbolic of Eden resurrected and restored to a new fullness and the

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<sup>7</sup> Karel Apek, *The Gardener's Year*, Modern Library Gardening, Feb. 19, 2002.

cosmos yet coming to life fully within God. She recognizes the gardener as her Teacher only when he calls her by name.

What Easter morning proclaims is the good news that, out of destruction and death, Jesus rises from the earthen tomb as the new Adam or resurrected *adamah* from the soil. God the Gardener, who planted a garden in Eden and then raised Jesus to new life in a garden, is still at work creating life and beauty in our world. No wonder at the empty tomb in the garden did the risen Christ appear to Mary Magdalene as the gardener. Her mistaken identification of the risen Jesus as the gardener bears much prophetic truth. Jesus, in fact, is the Gardener who transforms our lives now and finally and becomes at the same time the ultimate Garden where we meet the God of life anew and profoundly.

Magdalene's inclination is to touch or to cling onto Christ. She reaches out to cling to Jesus, but Jesus tells her that she cannot continue to hold on this way as his resurrection transformation is not completed until his body becomes transformed from one plane of existence into the entire eco-system. The resurrection of Jesus is not only the radical transformation of the crucified Christ but the "green" transformation of all things in God. All things become divinely interconnected through the risen Christ as he described himself to his disciples at the Last Supper as the vine connected to the branches and Abba God is the vine-grower or the gardener. (Jn. 15:1-ff.) This strengthens the irony of Magdalene's mistaken identity of Jesus as the gardener. The risen Christ now assumes the divine position of being God's garden and the Gardener at the same time. Ultimately, what gardens and Christ's resurrection have in common is the gift of abundant life. The sense of gift is the heart of the Easter experience--bringing surprise, abundant life, hope, and emotional peace and tranquility.

Magdalene and the other disciples were called to follow in the steps of the Christ the Gardener. They were invited to participate in the important job of co-creating and co-participating, co-creating, and co-living with the Spirit in giving life to the garden and bringing that garden to the fullness where God intends. As gardeners, Christians co-create gardens to help others find and meet God.

But God's garden, the Earth, is dying, and human beings are responsible for killing the garden through our impact on climate change. Our reckless greed for fossil fuels and reckless exploitation of the Earth's resources at the expense of other life has jeopardized God's garden. One of the contributing causes is humanity's disconnection with the Earth; we have separated ourselves from the web of life. We are separated from gardens and need to reconnect with gardens as intimate part of faith experience.

The most urgent need of today and the next decades is the transformation of humanity to reconnect intimately with our garden the Earth. Our arrogance has led to a radical disconnection and alienation from the Earth, and we have ravaged, exploited, and

damaged the Earth garden and its life. We as Christians need to foster a gardening spirituality that not only connects us with our foundational experience of Easter but overcomes our arrogant separation from nature by learning to reconnect reverently to the web of interrelated life. The key to human immersion is to re-discover the wonder, enchantment, and beauty of God immanent in the natural world. I have witnessed as people fall in love with nature, they will fight for what they cherish and love.

Thomas Berry, a Christian eco-theologian or self-described as a “geologist,” points out that humanity must learn to listen to the language of the Earth. Natural phenomena—plants and other life—have their own language, and the natural world resonates with the voice of the Creator and Gardener. Just as the gardener in my church learned to listen to the voices of each plant and the birds in our church garden and just as I sit attentive in the garden, listen to the voices of the Earth in the garden and pray. I discover the resurrected Gardener who teaches me what Thomas Berry describes as “wonder-filled intimacy” with all life and the planet Earth.

All human resources are required to heal, nurture, cultivate, and restore health to God’s garden. It is the fundamental revelation of Easter that we follow Christ as disciple gardeners. We create gardens and cultivate and care for gardens, for gardens are on a spiritual quest. Human beings have sought the Garden of Eden as place where God and humans once co-lived.<sup>8</sup> But God has promised us something greater—what God intended with the garden of the universe and the Garden of Eden—is to create them into a cosmic resurrection garden—where we walk once again with intimacy God in the garden.

We in the United Church of Christ are called to be healers of the wounds of the Earth—making amends for our sins of consumptive greed and for placing our heads in the sands. It starts with a personal conversation and mistaken identity that began on Easter Sunday when Christ appeared to Magdalene in the Garden and invited us to participate in God’s mission of gardening the Earth. Easter is about gardening the Earth and nurturing life on the Earth for God. One of my favorite quotes that I will conclude my Easter Garden reflection:

When God created the earth, God “made room” for us all and in so doing showed us the heart of divine life, indeed all life, is the generous and gracious gesture. As we Garden, that is, as we weed out the non-nurturing elements within us and train our habits to be more life promoting, we participate in the divine life and learn to see and feel the creation as God sees and feels it.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Merchant has demonstrated how strong the myth of Eden has functioned in western civilization. She proposes a new cultural narrative where humanity and the Earth work together to find Eden. *Re-Inventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, New York, Routledge, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Wirzba, *The Paradise of God: Renewing Religion in an Ecological Age*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Help commit yourself and your church this Easter to become gardeners of the Earth for Christ the Gardener and re-covenant your congregation and yourselves with the risen Christ and the garden of the Earth. You can do so by forming an Environmental Justice team in your congregation, join or create Environmental Team in your Association and/or Conference, and definitely connect yourself and your community to the Environmental Ministries of the United Church of Christ. Explore the denominational Environmental Ministries website.

([http://www.ucc.org/search\\_results?q=environmental+justice](http://www.ucc.org/search_results?q=environmental+justice)) Take a virtual tour that is explore the site and its multiple levels of resources, play with the site, led the Spirit and your curiosity direct yourself. I did and that, and the Holy Spirit brought me into the UCC by the wonderful resources and documents that I discovered as a gardener of the Earth. Make sure your conference website and church website has listed environmental justice resources and interconnections. Let the Spirit help you discover as Mary Magdalene did that Easter is the celebration of God's Garden and the risen Christ as the Gardener.