

## THE GARDEN TOMB

Forty years ago I stood in the parking lot of the bus station in Jerusalem. I saw it looming up stark and gruesome. The face was barren rock with three shallow caves, two near the top, and one much lower, running across the middle of the hill. The jagged holes near the top, half in shadow, resembled eye sockets. And the cave at the middle looked like a mouth. With clumps of moss and grass hanging here and there, the whole thing looked for all the world like a skull with bits of moldering flesh clinging to its bones.

The British General, Charles Gordon, discovered the hill about the time our church was being founded, and since then the place has been called Gordon's Calvary. It is one place in Jerusalem not overlaid with religious ornamentation. And it seems strangely out of place at the back of the bus station, something looming unchanged out of the past and now framed with the asphalt and litter of a parking lot.

Golgotha, if it be Golgotha, "The Place of the Skull" (John 19:17), is not easily accessible. There is no way to build a church over it, or even to examine the ancient caves which scar its face. So it has been kept free from that curious spirit which combines superstition and religious sentiment to make everything in the Holy Land a shrine.

It never became a tourist attraction. Yet travelers making the circuit of the other Calvary, more well-known and ornate, in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, or passing through the old city of Jerusalem, or journeying to Bethlehem and Hebron often pause for a moment in the parking lot and look up.

At the bottom of the hill there is a lovely garden maintained by a group of British missionaries. Several tombs carved into the base of the hill date from the first century, but the flower beds and gravel path winding through the garden, the shade trees and benches for people to use in quiet meditation are of modern vintage. There are no candles and no incense, no polished marble, no inlaid mosaics to spoil the natural beauty of the place. It is simply a well-kept garden, with several ancient graves.

The author of the Fourth Gospel says that after the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. They wrapped it with linen cloths and a hundred pounds of spices according to the Jewish burial custom, and laid it in the garden tomb. And then, on Easter morning the disciples' discovered that the tomb was empty. Mary met the Risen Jesus, but mistook him for a gardener.

In this Easter season, as we celebrate the glorious fact that Christ has been raised from the dead, I want to draw attention to the place where it all began: the garden tomb in Jerusalem.

Think with me for a moment about the hideous hill, Golgotha, and about the lovely garden which now stands at its base. It is a place of flowers and trees, a garden of groomed pathways and carefully arranged shrubs. If, in ancient times, it required the careful tending of a gardener, as Mary thought, then it may well have been a place of exceptional beauty and grace in Jesus' day just as it is today.

Try to picture that garden in your mind: a place of quiet beauty, kept lovely in a spirit of

reverence at the mysterious portals of death. It was a place where growing things kept silent testimony, even before Jesus demonstrated the fact, that God gives life and growth from beyond what we see as death and decay.

Perhaps it was a garden like this that led Paul to speak so eloquently to the Corinthians:

... someone will ask: "How is the resurrection achieved? With what sort of body do the dead arrive?" ... In your own experience you know that a seed does not germinate without itself "dying." When you sow a seed you do not sow the "body" that will eventually be produced, but bare grain, of wheat, for example, or one of the other seeds. God gives the seed a "body" according to his laws--a different "body" to each kind of seed. There are illustrations here of the raising of the dead. I Cor. 15:35 ff. (Phillips)

Mary Magdalene mistook Jesus for the gardener, but perhaps the mistake is indicative: gardeners know something of new life that others seldom take time to learn. A parable of death and resurrection is acted out each year in the growing season, and that lesson of new life beyond the grave has flourished over the centuries around the garden tomb in Jerusalem.

Gardeners know such things, and so do people who talk to their plants. They recognize that plants and people are all part of the same created universe. We are of the same stuff. It's the sort of insight that Tennyson expressed when he penned the lines:

Little flower--but if I could understand  
What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
I should know what God and Man is.

Of course plants are not "conscious" in the sense of humans who think and ponder, but they are partners with all created things in shaping the destiny of our world. And perhaps we humans share a special partnership with flowers in creating beauty. People have more creative latitude than flowers: a purple crocus or a yellow rose keeps coming up year after year with the same color and fragrance. But people generate variety. We are capable of more profound beauty.

In Romans 8, Paul speaks about the whole creation yearning together and groaning in travail until its promised redemption is at hand. Creation longs for a freedom from bondage to corruption and decay. Thus, the garden is a natural symbol of resurrection. How appropriate that Jesus' resurrection is set in a Jerusalem garden!

The authors of the Bible were careful not to follow the nature religions of Greece and Rome. Jesus' resurrection was not a product of the periodic summer and winter of the vegetation cycle. His triumph over the grave was not a legend told in the language of agriculture to explain the renewal of plant life each spring. The planting and sprouting which Paul uses to interpret the resurrection is a metaphor, a mental picture to help us understand our destiny. And the resurrection of Jesus happened once and for all. His return from the region of the dead is a foretaste and glimmer of the resurrection that awaits all believers.

The place of the skull and the lovely garden nearby are a setting of special significance. The fact that those two scenes, one so grotesque, the other so lovely and full of grace, should stand side by side is indicative, I think, of the close relationship between fear and faith, between devotion and dread. Every

human encounter with the sacred brings a profound sense of mystery, an experience of awe that verges on dread.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, if we can get beyond the easy words and familiar stories that sometimes keep us from thinking is like that. It pushes us to the limit with horror and beauty side by side. It brings us to the edge where we can no longer put things in neat categories and dismiss them. Death and resurrection are something beyond, something unknown and mysterious.

Our only way of knowing, of imagining that reaches beyond the comfortable categories of mind, comes by analogy, by comparison. We can know only by asking, what has pushed me to the edge of awe and reverence? What have I known of beauty that demands breathless silence? What commands that I take off my shoes and whisper because it is so lovely?

The garden at the base of Golgotha must have fostered such emotions: Mary stands weeping outside the tomb and then she stoops to look within. She sees two angels where the body of Jesus had been. Turning around she identifies a figure that, through her tears, she assumes to be the gardener. And then the happy recognition dawns: it is the Lord. In this sacred setting no wonder the words are few: "Mary," "Rabbouni." The deep grief of death has given way to horror that someone has robbed the grave. And that in turn has given way to sacred life, to faith, to love.

Can you believe something like that? Can you give way to the promptings that invite you to believe the message of rose and lily that death is not the end?

My wife, Dottie, died of pancreas cancer at noon on Easter day, 2001. With the family gathered around, I sat in a chair looking across her bed toward Lake Hartwell, where a wild dogwood was in glorious bloom. The sun made the blossoms glow in a brilliant white. The moment was a mixture of quiet sorrow and profound beauty. And now, every year as Easter approaches, when that same wild dogwood bursts into bloom, I remember, and give thanks to God for the wonderful years we had together. I view this Easter story in that light.

Mary thought he was the gardener. She had surrendered hope and faith to the certainty of death's fatal power. But then, in breathless wonder she recognized Jesus. I like to think that Mary went through the rest of her life treasuring flowers and shrubs. Every time she saw a flower, even when she could no longer embrace the risen Christ, she must have remembered, and felt a deep assurance: Christ is risen! He is alive! And because he lives, I, too, shall live!

What about you? How do you interpret the flowers of this Easter season. Can you believe their silent message? Can you affirm their quiet testimony? Christ is risen! He is alive! And because he lives, you, too, shall live!

So be it. Amen!