

“The Garden at Dawn: A Hopeful Vision”

April 4, 2021

The Grace of Les Misérables Series – Easter Sunday

In-person & Livestream

As the song goes, *‘tis GRACE hath brought me this far, and GRACE will lead me home*. GRACE has led us to today as we gather to celebrate the hope that God offers in resurrection, the transformation that God works even in death to bring new life. Victor Hugo offers a lesson in GRACE through Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. But the most amazing story is the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection. And it starts in a garden. Back there in a moment...

In the story of *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo describes gardens in many ways: a place of sanctuary, a place to do hard work, and even a meeting place for people who fall in love. For us, a garden may bring an image of a beautiful space to visit when it’s someone else’s or hard work of planting, watering, weeding, and watching things grow. Gardening can be a source of joy for some. Growing up on a farm, some years we had a large garden that required a lot of time and attention. And I remember the tomato worms!

So the Good News of resurrection starts in a garden – where loved ones are buried and where people go to acknowledge and face the reality of death. That’s where Mary Magdalene is when life changes forever. Her life had changed drastically once before when Jesus healed her, and this moment is another amazing change!

Gardens are important places throughout Scripture. Our faith story starts in a garden. **SHOW SLIDE:** From Genesis 2

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden...In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil....

In the beginning, there’s a sense of peace in this garden God creates for humanity to grow. Gardens can offer us peace, seeing the beauty of creation, and feeling our connection with God as Creator.

But gardens also take a great amount of work. God gave humanity a job – to work the garden – even as God was in close relationship with them. Jean Valjean had a season where he worked in the garden, and his work informs his experience of grace. Sometimes grace means hard work. Grace is a free gift, but it can take us a long time to truly receive and accept it. It takes Valjean a lifetime to understand the beauty of grace received.

We navigated that difficulty in this season – of truly receiving grace as a gift, not trying to “pay it back,” but rather responding to it. I just experienced a moment like that recently – when a friend decided to do something for someone else because of grace they’d received from me, which was truly a gift – passing it on rather than paying it back. And I realized the blessing of both offering and receiving grace.

We’re going to play the clip from *Les Mis* that shows a hopeful vision of grace. As Jean Valjean draws his final breath, we see a holy, heavenly vision, too – with those who have died before him gathered together singing about freedom and peace.

For those of you who are watching the livestream, there will be a break in the action because we’re not able to show copyrighted material on our livestream. The link was sent out in Friday’s note, and I’ll send it out again later. It’s about 4 ½ minutes, so stay tuned!

SHOW MEDIA – *Finale*

It’s a powerful moment – this thin place where heaven and earth meet. Valjean is in the convent, which has become a place of refuge for him. And we see the light and hope of heaven. Grace has come full circle – from the moment of receiving grace from the priest to this moment when he experiences the welcome of love in death. As Valjean says, his is a story of one who turned from hating to learning to love. It’s a moment of grace.

When we gathered last Thursday night, we heard Jesus praying in a garden, even agonizing and asking for God’s help, asking his friends to watch and pray with him. His experience reminds us that grace is costly – never cheap. God’s grace shows itself in sacrificial love. To truly accept grace and understand it, we journey through the pain of the cross.

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb with the pain of the cross in mind. She comes with the intent to honor Jesus and prepare his body. And she assumes that the person she encounters is a gardener – the one in charge of tending the space. Who else would be there?

Pastor Matt Rawle says, “This isn’t a case of mistaken identity; rather she is seeing Christ for the fully human and fully divine master gardener he is. After all, God’s first gift to humanity was a garden, and our first job was keeping it. Of course, Jesus looks like a gardener at the Resurrection.” The garden is where she goes from weeping to rejoicing – then to witnessing.

Our faith story ends in a garden, too.

SHOW SLIDE: From Revelation 22

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit,

yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations...

It's interesting to hear the vision that John receives in exile put up against the words from *Les Mis*: **SHOW SLIDE:**

*They will live again in freedom in the garden of the Lord
We will walk behind the ploughshare; We will put away the sword
The chain will be broken, and all men will have their reward.*

Those are the same images for the Kingdom of God – a reclaiming of the relationship with God that is centered on peace with God and peace between people, the chain being broken – nothing to keep us from freedom and joy in God – not even the struggle of sin or the pain of death.

It's a beautiful vision that all of us want to claim – the hope of life lived fully in God's presence and the promise of new life and resurrection – that death doesn't have the final word, that our lives are full of meaning, and that God's love – God's grace – is the most powerful force anywhere!

It's the hopeful vision that Mary Magdalene experiences in the garden. But it's not for her alone. Jesus is quick to say – don't hold onto me. And if I'm honest, that's exactly what I'd want to do – hold onto Jesus for life. Instead, Jesus tells Mary to go and tell others the truth – that death is defeated – that he lives!

And it's simply amazing – and unbelievable news – after all they've experienced. The quick turn of the crowd, the mounting tension between Jesus and those in power, his arrest, trial, going to the cross, the humiliation of his death, and his burial. Jesus was dead. He was buried, and now is he alive!

Our faith rests on this Good News and the witness of Mary and everyone who has shared it since. And we continue to share it amid the pain and joy of our lives – grief, confusion, violence, hatred, anguish. Resurrection doesn't mean that the real hurt of the world is ignored. We don't have to look far to know that pain is real. Resurrection comes in the midst of chaos and weeping. It's a reminder that God knows it all and receives it all – and can redeem it all in love.

It's Good News of eternal life – a hopeful vision after earthly death – and it's a hopeful vision of life lived with God here and now – of God's love, care, and grace in this moment! As we celebrate baptism today, we remember our own. We remember God's grace for us – from the beginning to the end. It's a hopeful vision we're called to show in our actions and tell with our lives.

Maybe that's why the line from *Les Mis* gets me every time.

HOW SLIDE: *To love another person is to see the face of God.* God is with us, and God is reflected when we love in the spirit of Jesus. Hope is always there – even when it doesn't seem possible or plausible. We worship God who brings hope when it all seems hopeless! And God uses us to bring that hope.

Even at the end of story of *Les Mis*, Victor Hugo offers a challenge. In the midst of a wedding celebration for Marius and Cosette, there are two children begging for food. Yes, there is hope, but the hopeful vision isn't fully realized yet.

Just like Mary Magdalene is sent out of the garden to be a witness to the grace of God, so are we sent out into the world to make it more like that hopeful vision – to work for God in this moment.

Christ indeed is risen, and our witness and work continue in his name!

May it be so. Thanks be to God! AMEN.