

April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday

"MORNING IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 10:34-43 ~ John 20:1-18

How far would you go to find God? Several years ago a group of folks from Taiwan moved all the way across the wide Pacific Ocean to Garland, Texas because their leader, Heng-ming Chen, told them that God would appear (in person!) on March 31st ... right there in Garland!

I wonder what these people thought when they got off the bus in Garland. It isn't exactly the garden spot of the world. You would think that God might choose a more suitable place to materialize ... in the heart of a major city, for instance, or on a mountain top somewhere in France. But Garland, TX!?

It turned out that God was a no-show. It was on the evening news. Prophet Chen, leader of "God's Salvation Church," walked out in a white robe to tell the hundred reporters... and fifty police ... and a hundred and fifty simple souls who had followed him from Taiwan to Texas ... in search of the ultimate mystery of life ... that he was wrong and that his prophecy should be treated as nonsense. But what would possess so many people to sell all their worldly possessions, borrow money from friends and relatives, and travel halfway around the world to a suburb outside of Dallas, Texas in search of God?

Carole Ann Cropper from the "New York Times" visited some of them the following day as they sat around a backyard swimming pool in Garland. Some said they would try to stay and some said they would go back home to Taiwan. "Everyone is very calm," said one of the faithful, Chin-Hung Chiang. He said that he was not disappointed and still trusted in leader Chen. "The world of the spiritual is invisible," he said. "It's very difficult to explain what is going on."

Well, here I am in this white chasuble this morning ... repeating the angel's message to the disciples centuries ago ... "Christ is alive! He will appear to you! Have faith! Give up everything else and follow him!" Seems a little silly, doesn't it? A little hard to believe? And what if Christ is a no-show today? How will we be so different from those hundred and fifty souls sitting around a backyard pool in Garland wondering what to do next? Are we any less ridiculous? Any less self-deluded?

The truth is ... Christ is a no-show all too often in our experience ... or at least it seems that way. We can never make him show up at the moment of our choosing ... do our bidding ... fix everything the way we want it to be. The world of the spiritual is invisible. It is very difficult to explain what is going on. And it is absolutely impossible to command an appearance from God because God is free ... and God is in control ... and God will do as God pleases whether we like it or not.

Of course, we already know that about God, so no one took that strange white-robed Taiwanese

cult too seriously to begin with. I doubt any of the reporters actually expected God to materialize (in person!), though I hope some of them were at least wishing it might come true. No, chances are that they were there to see the reaction of disappointed faith ... maybe even to make fun and give us all a smile. Then again, maybe *we* don't expect the risen Christ to walk among us here this morning, either ... not really. But I tell you today ... Christ is alive, and he is here (in person!). I am not wrong and this prophecy is not nonsense. He is here! We just can't see him. We can't see him because we aren't looking for him. We can't see him because we don't recognize him. We can't see him because seeing him would change everything, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it?

Mary Magdalene couldn't see the risen Christ. She was looking in the wrong place. She was still hanging out at the tomb, but Jesus wasn't there. Likewise, we hold on to the dead issues ... to bitterness and brokenness ... old grudges, old wounds, old griefs ... when Christ is waiting to give us a life beyond those things. We sit in the tombs of our fears and failures ... not realizing that the stone has been rolled away ... and that daylight is breaking just outside. Or we keep going back to the tomb to visit the body of our past ... to resolve what can never be resolved now. We hold on to what somebody did to us and choose to remain victims. Or we hold on to the guilt of what we did to somebody else and ignore God's offer of forgiveness so that we can move on ... do better ... learn from our mistakes, and start over again.

Remember God's word to Isaiah? *"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; (Isaiah 65:17-18).* We are the Easter people. We are *not* a people of despair, but of hope ... a future looking ... forward moving ... people because we know Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Say it with me now ... Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

Mary could not see Jesus because she was weeping. And we do have reason to weep in this world. Life carries its share of sorrows. When we hear about children shooting children so that even our school yards are not safe places, we ought to weep. When we see pictures of homes devastated by tornadoes or earthquakes or floods or bombs, we ought to weep. When we learn what women are enduring in most third world countries ... when we hear about the plight of refugees from war torn countries ... what life is like every day for the poorest of the poor right here in Wisconsin, we ought to weep. The world is not yet what God longs for it to be, not even close. Some of you here today feel a special loss, someone you are missing ... someone you love has gone to the grave, and you long to see your beloved today.

Let us remember how Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died. Let us remember how he cried when he looked down at the city of Jerusalem and considered the hard-heartedness of God's own people. Let us remember that God understands our tears and that God's is the first heart to break. But don't let your tears so obscure your vision that you do not see that "the Resurrection and the Life" who holds you ... guarantees you a future as blessed as the past you remember. Don't let your weeping obscure your vision of a God who cannot be overcome even by death ... whose dream for a just and peaceful world calls us to join as collaborators in a new creation. *"Never let anything so fill you with sorrow,"* said Mother Teresa, *"that you forget the joy of Christ risen!"*

"Why are you weeping?" the angels ask Mary ... just as they ask us today when we give in too much to sorrow and cynicism and doubt. Because we are the Easter people! We are not a

people resigned and helpless ... but active and engaged ... because we know Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

Mary did not see Jesus because she mistook him for somebody else. Jesus was right there with her (in person!), but she confused him for the gardener. I wonder why? Was he stooping in the dirt and forming something ... or someone ... out of the soil so he could breathe into it the breath of life?

There we are, in the garden around the tomb. It is God walking with us in the garden of Eden again ... the garden of this life ... the garden of good and evil. It is dawn, the dawn of a new creation. Funny thing about dawn ... it is difficult to locate precisely. There is this "in between" time. The light has broken, but the shadows are still there. Not all of the darkness is dispelled. But a new day is surely arriving. It is unmistakable. No one can stop it. And in this "in between" moment Christ is already with us ... we just don't recognize him for who he is. It turns out that he is Jesus and he is the gardener ... the gardener of the new creation. And sometimes, Christ appears to us in interesting disguises.

On Bill Moyer's PBS special *Addiction*, Wendy Walker tells her story of overcoming her soul killing alcoholism. She became a counselor with Hazeltown in New York City, an addiction recovery program. But over twenty years ago she was so deeply inside the bottle, that she took a razor and cut both of her cheeks from ear to chin. She cut her own face because she was so filled with self-hatred when she looked in the mirror. One day she was so desperate for a drink that she went to see someone she had just met, Genevieve, to ask for a couple of dollars. Genevieve told Wendy she would give her the two dollars if she would go with her to a meeting first.

Wendy would have done anything to get the money to buy a bottle of the cheapest wine, so she agreed to go. But when Genevieve told her they would be riding a city bus to get there, Wendy felt humiliated. She had let herself go. Her hair was a matted mess. She wore the same threadbare clothes for weeks at a time. She smelled badly. But she wanted those two dollars. She had to have those two dollars! As they got on the bus, Wendy figured that Genevieve would sit on the other side of the aisle ... maybe two or three rows away ... and pretend that she didn't even know her. But she didn't! Genevieve sat right next to her ... talked to her as if to a friend ... treated her with dignity and respect ... even in her deplorable condition. As Wendy Walker told this story, even though it was over twenty years later, tears filled her eyes and ran across her scarred cheeks when she remembered how Genevieve actually sat down next to her on that bus.

Genevieve took her to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, of course. Wendy said she realized she needed some kind of help from outside herself. She just wasn't strong enough to quit on her own. She couldn't believe in God at the time. She was too ashamed of herself ... too low down in life ... and God seemed too far away. But she could believe in Genevieve, and later in her group. Finally she reconnected with God, her true higher power, who helped her overcome the addiction.

You see what I mean? Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Genevieve was Christ (in person!) for Wendy Walker. Christ risen ... disguised as a woman named Genevieve ... saved Wendy Walker's life just because she was willing to sit

down next to her on a bus.

God is not a “no-show.” God is never a “no-show” ... no matter how it seems. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, no sin, no sorrow, no tragedy, no cross ... nothing! We are the Easter people! We know Christ is alive because we have seen him for ourselves. The message of Easter is the same as the message of Christmas ... Emmanuel ... God is with us!

I wish I could tell leader Chen of "God's Salvation Church" that God was already there in Garland when they arrived, and that God doesn't have to materialize in a suburb to be at work in the world. In fact, God was already there in Taiwan before they left. You don't have to go far to find God ... God is with you ... beside you ... within you ... in person! And the risen Christ is here at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Eagle River this morning ... in this community ... in the person who isn't afraid to sit next to you ... no matter what shame you have brought on yourself or tried to place on others. The risen Christ is here in a group of people who will stand tall for their convictions ... and stoop low to love the least of these who need our help. The risen Christ is here among a family of faith who feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty ... who welcome the stranger and clothe the naked and visit the sick and those in prison. Christ is alive in the body of Christ ... this church ... and he walks among us all the time even though we are sinners, every one. Haven't you already met him (in person!) in someone who is here today ... in a person who has been Christ to you when you needed him?

And it is dawn again ... and it is Easter again ... and the angels are crying out the good news. It is morning in the garden of good and evil ... and the good has won, and if you will step out of the shadows ... walk away from the tomb of your past ... dry your eyes ... and look around ... you will surely see him in this place. If you will choose the life he offers ... the life that overcomes every sorrow and every pain and even death itself ... you will walk with him in the garden forever.

My friends, why are you still weeping? We are the Easter people! Haven't you heard the good news? Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) Amen.

May we pray?

Dear God, lift us out of our sorrows. Move us out of our complacency. Help us leave our fears behind. Lead us out of the tombs of our past. For you have promised us life, life abundant, life eternal, real life. We embrace this life and welcome the risen Christ into our hearts this day so that we might carry his love to others who still sit alone in darkness. Alleluia, Lord, we greet you! Walk among us again in the garden and finish your new creation work in us for your honor and glory. Amen.