

## ***Why Have a Garden at Church?***

What comes to mind when someone mentions a garden? Some may think of vegetables or flowers; others think of lush greenery, towering trees, flowering bushes and plants of various shapes and sizes. A garden is a selected area of protected ground cultivated to raise food or a place of beauty for quite contemplative repose. So why waste church ground with a garden? How does a garden support our mission to spread Christ's message?

Throughout Scripture, God uses gardens, vineyards, and orchards to connect with his people. In Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, a man and a woman experience the care, instruction and power of a loving Father in the Garden of Eden. God continues to use gardens and plants through many Bible stories; e.g., 1 Kings 21:2; Psalm 1:3, Ecclesiastes 2:4-5, and Ezekiel 17:22-24.

Like His Father, Christ used trees, plants, and vineyards in many of his parables. Jesus goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to talk to God and plead for clemency. Why not the synagogue or the temple? The late hour may have had something to do with his choice; maybe those sacred spaces were closed and locked for security reasons. Why that garden? It was an olive orchard. Olive branches have come to be symbolic of peace and hope, and at this point in Jesus' life, He may have been running a little short on both. He asked the 11 disciples to sit in the garden while He prayed, but Peter, James and John went with Him, and He asked them to "Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matthew 26:38) After a hectic day of Passover preparations, an emotional dinner full of drama and more of Jesus' mind-bending teaching, once they had a quiet moment to themselves, what did the disciples do? They fell asleep and what does Jesus say to Peter? "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." (Mark 14:38)

Is this the last reference to gardens? No; fast-forward about 24 hours. Where does God choose to set the stage for one of the most important events of all time? After Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus, wrapped it with spices and strips of linen, and placed it in a new tomb in a nearby garden. (John 19:38-42) On the third day, our Savior emerged from the tomb, where we know he greeted Mary Magdalene. She saw Jesus but she did not recognize him and thought he was the gardener. (John 20:14-15)

What might we glean from this brief scriptural review? Like Mary, Jesus is waiting for us in the garden. What better place to praise God for His creation? It's a sacred space to be still and meditate in silence. Mother Teresa reminds us, "Listening is the beginning of prayer;" a retreat from daily distractions for reflection and quiet thanksgiving.

For the soul who comes to St Matthew's after a sleepless night seeking quiet sanctuary, that person might find our church doors closed and locked. In the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas' Spring/Summer 2012 edition of *Reflections*, the Reverend Mary Earle writes of sheltered silence as medicine for a troubled soul and suggests church communities find other ways to offer "sheltering silence," when their church doors are locked. Our garden may be just such a place.

What an appropriate setting for an Easter Sunrise Service, or a place to do as Christ suggested, to watch and pray. A garden is an organic, living, changing timepiece, reminding us, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven." (See Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15)