

Text: John 20:1-18

Theme: Thy Will Be Done - Eli, the Gardener

Easter Sunday 2018

Good morning, everyone! As if it matters, my name is Eli, but most just know me as the gardener, the caretaker, if you will, of the burial area in our community. My job was to keep the area looking nice, make sure that everything was in order whenever someone chose to come to visit one of the tombs which had been hew out of the stone.

Enough about me. I'm sure you want to hear what I know about the events that occurred three days after Jesus was crucified.

But before I get to that information, we need to back up a bit. As you know, Jesus was crucified on Friday afternoon. But things were anything but normal when that moment occurred. I didn't know the exact time of His death. I only found out afterwards, but now I know that the ground began to shake the moment He died, and, since I happened to be in the garden, I saw tombs where the stone in front the door suddenly broke and some of the stones fell open. It was dark at the time, but once I could finally see and frightened enough by what I heard, I ventured over to look inside of a couple of the tombs. I was shocked, scarred and nervous because the bodies were gone! Vanished. I didn't know what to think. All I remember was that I wanted to run, but didn't know where to run.

You see, I was a believer of sorts in this Jesus, but I wasn't convinced He would really do anything for me or in my life. So I knew Him, but I really didn't know Him. But let me tell you, when I realized that some of those dead people were alive, it gave me shivers; it made me nervous. As I did my work that day, I kept looking behind and around. I don't know what I was expecting, but I was on edge all day long, restless, out of sorts.

Earlier on, talking to the gardener who cared for the Garden of Gethsemane, I had learned that Jesus had said, "Not My will, but Your will be done." I don't know why, but that phrase stuck in my mind. As I worked, it kept recurring. It was like I was supposed to do something with it, but I had no clue what to do. My will? His will? It didn't make any sense at the time.

Back to Friday. So Jesus died, the earth went dark; some of the tombs were opened and some people were verified as alive from the dead. Friday evening, just before I was going to call it a day, I heard a noise in the garden. Since I knew my place was to be invisible when people arrived to visit, I hid behind a tree where I could see, but not be seen. It was almost dark, but, from a distance, I could tell, based on the people, that they were bringing the body of Jesus. I wondered where they would put Him because His family didn't have a tomb set aside, but, much to my surprise, they laid him in the tomb of a rich man who was a dedicated follower of Jesus.

As they did their work hastily since the Sabbath was coming, they were soon gone. So, I took a quick look at the tomb. I don't know what I expected to see, but again I

heard the words, "Not My will, but Your will be done." I shuttered and hurried home. It had been an eventful day and I was exhausted.

The next day, Saturday, was the Sabbath, a day for quiet worship, not work. As I headed off to worship, I passed by the garden. I thought no one would notice, so I quickly ran to the place where they had laid Jesus. I don't know why, but I just wanted to go. As I got close, I was shocked by what I saw. There were guards on either side of the tomb and I could see that the stone had been sealed. I didn't go any closer, but left before anyone noticed.

Since our Sabbath was on Saturday, I went to the garden early Sunday morning. I always liked to get to my work in the early morning hours. It was such a quiet, peaceful time. As I arrived, I went to the tomb and once again, those words, "Thy will be done," thundered in my mind as I got closer to the tomb. I stopped abruptly when I heard voices. Three women, were headed for the tomb with spices. My first thought was, "What are you going to do about the stone?" But as I followed at a distance, I suddenly stopped in my tracks. The tomb was open and the guards were, well, what can I say, they were like dead men. When the women saw that the tomb was open, they turned and ran the other way, startled to say the least.

Not making a sound, I waited to see what would happen next. It wasn't long before I heard footsteps and then I saw Peter and John running for the tomb. As they arrived, John looked into the tomb. Peter, being his usual self, walked right into the tomb. As the two conversed, I realized that Jesus wasn't in the tomb. Not only that, I realized that the clothes that had been wrapped around His body and the special cloth that was wrapped around His face were still lying in the tomb collapsed, as if the body had suddenly disappeared. The linen around His face, I could hear them say, was neatly folded and setting off to the side as if someone had taken the time to fold it before they left.

Just then, those words thundered in my head again, "Thy will be done." I kept wondering about those words, but all I could do, was push them aside as I had done before and keep watching. As John stood in the doorway, I suddenly saw him kneel, and, since I was close enough now, I heard him say, "My Lord and my God." I knew what those words meant. John was a disciple, but he still had questions. Now, his questions vanished. He had his proof. His faith, fragile as it had been, had taken a giant leap forward.

As the disciples left, Mary stayed behind. I didn't want to disturb her so I stayed where I was to watch and listen. Mary was in tears. Her Lord was gone and that was worse than seeing His body in the tomb. Not knowing what to do, Mary looked into the empty tomb. At first, I didn't know what had happened, but Mary jumped as though she were suddenly startled. Then, I heard a voice. But how could there be a voice when the tomb was empty? Quietly, I moved closer so that I could see in the doorway. Startled myself, I looked again and sure enough, there were two angels in the tomb talking to Mary. I heard one say, "Why are you weeping," and I thought, "Really, what kind of a question is that?" I wanted to say something, but I couldn't because no one knew I was watching.

Then, Mary turned around and all of the sudden I realized that there was someone else present, not another angel, but Someone who looked a lot like Jesus. I heard Him say, "Who are you looking for?" and, once again, I thought, "What kind of question is that? This is the tomb where Jesus was laid so who else could she be looking for?" As Mary looked at Him, her words told me what she was thinking. She thought He was the gardener! I wanted to step out of hiding and say, "Good morning. I'm Eli, the gardener," just to clear things up, but before I was foolish enough to move, Jesus said, "Mary." As He did so, Mary realized it was Jesus and, even though she was still confused, her tears of sorrow quickly turned to tears of joy. The tomb was empty and Jesus was alive. It didn't make sense to her or to me, but, for the moment, those were the facts, confusing as they may have been.

A few minutes later, both Mary and Jesus left the tomb. Since no one was around, I stepped into the tomb and those words struck my heart like someone was stabbing me with a knife, "Thy will be done." I dropped to my knees and the only words that came out of my mouth were, "My Lord and my God." Suddenly, it all made sense. The cross was empty. The tomb was empty. God's will had been done. The method was unique, but His plan had been fulfilled. Jesus had died. He had risen and my evidence was the empty cross and the empty tomb.

For the next couple of hours, I sat in that tomb. At times, I poured out my confession, admitted my foolishness, my lack of faith. Other times, it was as if God was speaking to my heart, teaching me, preparing me for a future that was unknown to me, but a future I was surprisingly ready to face. I can't explain what happened during those hours, but something happened and it happened to me, to my heart, and it changed my life forever.

Stepping out of the tomb, I knew things would be different, that that moment was a turning point. Finally, after hearing and seeing Jesus for several years, I took His message to heart instead of allowing it to merely pass in and out of my mind. Finally, I believed He was the Messiah, the Son of God, and Lord of my life. Finally, I believed that Paradise, the Paradise I heard He had spoken about on the cross, was mine and, finally, I realized that my life, even as a gardener, was my opportunity to respond to all He had done for me. From that day on, worship wasn't my Saturday, Sabbath day duty; it was my most wonderful opportunity to meet with my Lord, with the One who had left the tomb, and on that same day, given me a new understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

As I picked up my pruner and my rake, I said out loud with a boldness that startled me, "Not my will, but Your will be done this day," and I returned to my task as gardener with a different purpose and a different future.

Well, that's probably not exactly what you expected to hear as my account of the events that occurred Easter morning. But, this much I will tell you before I go, "If you" or perhaps I should say, "When you take those words, 'Thy will be done,' to heart and live by those words, they will change your heart and your life. Starting now, say it and believe it, 'Not my will, but Your will be done,' and then, expect it and watch it happen because, if Jesus can rise from the dead and change me, He can and He will change you." Well, back to my work as gardener.