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*The* FURROW

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Gerald O'Collins

'Jesus and Mary'

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‘If it were England, and later in the day,  
she might have met him, faded shirt,  
scuffed leggings and all, partly shadowed  
by long allees at, say, Chiswick—  
everything turned to vista, seeking out  
the Statue of Cain and Abel, the Domed  
Building, the Rustic Arch, the Doric Column  
Topped by Venus, the Bagnio,  
the Obelisk, and the Deer House, and the rest.

As it was, the heart gone out of her with grief,  
she picked her way through scrubby bushes,  
expecting nothing but the nothing left  
when love’s pegged up for the sun to eat.  
It was peculiar, then, to round a rock  
and find some idler, hands pinked  
by spiky work, but the rest of him at ease,  
liking the morning, nestling a crocus,  
his wide mouth practiced about her name.’

Peter Steele, SJ (1939–2012), ‘Gardener’  
(used with permission).

Without ever naming them, the ‘*Gardener*’ takes up the story of Mary Magdalene meeting the risen Jesus (John 20:11–18). The poem contrasts the place and time that the evangelist provides (‘As it was’ in ‘the morning’) with an alternate scenario (‘If it were England and later in the day’).

The poem elaborates this *alternative* vision of Christ the Gardener wearing a ‘faded shirt, scuffed leggings’ and ‘partly shadowed’ by the hedges of ‘long allees’. The garden that Lord

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Gerald O’Collins, SJ, [Professor Emeritus Gregorian University, Rome] thanks Tom Casey, SJ, and Brendan Duddy, SJ, for help with this article; his recent books include *The Beauty of Jesus Christ* (Oxford University Press).

Burlington laid out in the eighteenth century for Chiswick House creates a specific, possible setting for the crucified and risen Jesus to appear in the afternoon.

Steele lingers over what he saw on a visit to that garden: the Cain and Abel Bird-Cage, the Rustic Arch, the Obelisk in the Orange Tree Garden, the ornamental Deer House. ‘and the rest’.

By evoking the formal beauty of a classic, eighteenth-century garden, Steele draws forth a feeling of serenity. This is abruptly shattered by what happened to Mary Magdalen at the crucifixion: ‘the heart gone out of her with grief’.

Rather than walk down stately allees that lead to Jesus’ tomb, Mary ‘picks her way through scrubby bushes’.

Naming Christ as ‘love’ itself, the poem speaks of his execution as being ‘pegged up for the sun to eat’. Now, in Steele’s paradoxical words, Mary expects ‘nothing but the nothing left’ when such a crucifixion takes place.

In a studied and striking understatement, the poem calls it ‘peculiar’ to ‘round a rock’ and meet the crucified and risen Christ. Yet, apparently, she takes him at first to be ‘some idler’.

The marks on his hands nailed to a cross remain: ‘hands pinked with spiky work’ of the Roman nails. But ‘the rest of him’ is ‘at ease, liking the morning’ and ‘nestling a crocus’, a beautiful sign of a new spring and fresh life.

At the start, the poem puts Mary Magdalene in first place: ‘she might have met him’. It is after all her search for the body of Jesus that initiates the whole story. But what begins as a search for a corpse ends with finding her living Lord. He is like a gardener fondling the first crocus that incarnates the coming of spring.

That scene might lead us to borrow words from Shakespeare and speak of ‘journey’s end in lovers’ meeting’.

Steele catches the power of the moment in John’s Easter story when Jesus addresses her: ‘Mary’. That name comes spontaneously to him. He has so often repeated it: ‘his wide mouth practiced about her name’.

But no one says her name more beautifully and powerfully. Readers know what comes next, when she runs to bring the astonishingly good news to the other disciples.

The power of this poem depends in part on the contemporary language used to tell a familiar story: the terrible grief of Mary Magdalene as ‘the heart gone out of’ her, crucifixion as ‘spiky work’ or being ‘pegged up’, and the rest.

‘*Gardener*’ left me with various questions. Why set Chiswick House and its gardens as a background to Jesus appearing to Mary? The imagination of readers comes very much into play. In post-World War II years, I often took a road to Heathrow airport

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that passed near to Lord Burlington's home and stately garden. Such a road and airport could easily bring to mind the whole, busy world on which the resurrection of the crucified Jesus has its unique impact. But any desire to name just one meaning here would remain misguided.

As friends of Peter Steele will know, reading his work triggers many associations and resonances. He was nothing if not a poet in dialogue. Take the references to allees being 'partly shadowed' 'later in the day' (lines one and three) but followed by the 'witty' comment about the risen Jesus 'liking the morning' (penultimate line). Should we think of Steele taking up lines 28 ('Your shadow at morning striding behind you') and 29 ('Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you') of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but reversing the order of morning and evening and pointing first to evening in the eighteenth-century Chiswick gardens and then to morning in a first-century Jerusalem garden?

Steele remarks of Mary Magdalene 'it was peculiar, then, to round a rock and find' the risen Jesus, not—what readers of Eliot will recall—'fear in a handful of dust' (*The Waste Land*, line 30). Paradoxically called 'some idler', Jesus reaches out to nature in the form of a beautiful crocus and to Mary through uttering so wonderfully her name.

Even clearer is another echo of T. S. Eliot. Saying of 'the Gardener' that 'the rest of him was at ease' should remind us of the third last line of 'The Journey of The Magi' and their being 'no longer at ease here'. A famous African novel by Chinua Achebe took its title from this line: *No Longer at Ease* (1960). The journey of Christ through life and death had left him 'at ease', apart from the permanent signs of the crucifixion.