

Title: Don't Cling To Me
Text: John 20: 1 – 18
Date: April 01, 2018
EASTER SUNDAY

I don't know how many of you feel sorry for preachers when Easter lands on April Fools' Day. There is not a lot of history for how others have dealt with it, since the last time it happened was in 1956 . . . and it won't be happening again until 2029, and then again in 2040. I certainly don't intend to regale you with jokes this morning, but maybe I can figure out a way to conclude with an honorable mention of the day's irony.

We need to be reminded that *the original* Easter message was decidedly not, **"Jesus is alive, and here's what that means for the next world."** The true Easter message was more along the lines of **"Jesus is alive, and here's what that means to me now."** So how does *that* work?

The resurrection appearances in the Fourth Gospel are really comprised of distinct stories of how different people would answer that question: Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Peter. This morning I will be looking through the lens of Mary Magdalene, and my focus will end up being on a particular detail of her story that grabbed my attention this time around.

The story begins with Mary going to the tomb, finding the stone rolled away, and running back to tell Peter and John that they had taken Jesus' body away. All three then run back to the tomb, and find nothing but linen wrappings lying there. Peter and John then returned home, not knowing what was going on.

In verse 11 we read that Mary looks into the empty tomb and is befuddled to find two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been before.

"They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, **'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?'** Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, **"Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."** Jesus said to her, **"Mary!"** She turned and said to him in Hebrew, **'Rabbouni!'** (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, **"Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."** (vv. 13–17)

So much we could comment on here, but I want to focus on that point when – after she recognizes that it is Jesus she is speaking to . . .

"She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!'
Jesus said to her, **'Do not hold on to me . . .'"**

That is the phrase that captured my imagination. It is variously translated: **"Do not hold on to me."** **"Stop holding onto me."** **"Do not touch me,"** or **"Do not cling to me."** The use of the present tense (*haptou*) suggests in this context that Jesus is not forbidding her to touch him, but telling her to stop doing what she is already doing. Such clinging may suggest that she is not only trying to assure herself that he is really right there in front of her, but also expressing her desire that he not leave her again.

We know that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were quite close, and entirely comfortable with one another. Her going to the tomb, and her weeping, seem to be clear indications of her love for

him. With the shock of a public and horrifying execution, who could blame her for now grabbing ahold of him – to steady herself, if nothing else?

So considering the circumstances, does it strike you as at all cool or insensitive for Jesus to simply say, **“Don’t cling to me?”** You would think he might give her a big bear hug! One almost gets the impression of an annoyed parent, with a toddler grabbing their leg to keep them from going off to work.

I hope I am not reading too much into this, but I can almost imagine Jesus thinking: **“Mary, we’ve had some amazing times together these past three years. You’ll never know how much I cherish those memories. Even so, something unbelievably extraordinary has just happened – and is happening even now – that you are not capable of beginning to comprehend. I hate to tell you this, but there is no going back to “the old days.” You call me teacher, but I am more than that. It is all good, though. It is more than good. Trust me! Don’t cling to me now, but jump into the flow.”**

Who could blame Mary for wanting to hold on to the familiar Jesus! Seems like only human nature. Yet the Christ has so much more in mind.

So let me tell you how this speaks to me. I think that all of us have a view or experience of Jesus that has become comfortable to us over the years. It might have begun with a nightlight we had as a child, where a soft bulb illuminates a picture of Jesus holding a little lamb. This image might have been reinforced with our singing, “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” As we got older, our self-confidence might have been buoyed up as we were told that we lived in a Christian nation, and our nation was the best nation in the world. We might have had a picture of Jesus on the wall of our home with warm eyes . . . a picture that looked an awful lot like people in our own culture.

Perhaps you get the idea. Most of us have cherished images of Jesus that have served us well over the years – images that have comforted us, and made us feel secure. We love to hold on to those images. Dare I say that it is in our very nature to cling to those images.

You have heard me speak before of what I call the Cosmic Christ. Might we imagine the Cosmic Christ speaking to us this Easter: **“Don’t cling to these old images of me – even though they have served you well over the years. We’ve had some good times together, but it is time to let go of some of those images you have had of me that have kept me tame, kept me small, kept me conformed to *your* image of how I should look and act in the world. I am so much more than all that. Don’t cling to the old ways. I am very alive in the world even now, but you have to develop new eyesight in order to see me now.”**

Can you sense *the desperation* in Mary’s clinging? We love our good ol’ image of Jesus, and we don’t want to let go. To be perfectly honest, the very thought of letting go of that image is a little frightening.

I have heard more and more people give a different kind of testimony these days, even here in Shepherdstown. More people have told me their stories of how they have come to let go of the grip they had on the Jesus of their childhood. Were they going crazy? Were they becoming a heretic? But eventually it was as though they heard a Voice call them, and assure them it was OK to let go. They have found new love and joy in a living Christ who tells them, **“This is all bigger than you ever imagined! This is all more real than you ever imagined.”**

If you care to frame this in theological language, let me share with you a quote from Richard Rohr that grapples with this: **“Christ is eternal; Jesus is born in time. Jesus without Christ**

invariably becomes a time-bound and culturally-bound religion that excludes much of humanity from Christ's embrace. On the other hand, Christ without Jesus would easily become an abstract metaphysics or a mere ideology without personal engagement."

I am thankful for the life of Jesus, for his teachings, for his tangible expressions of God's love. I am thankful that he was able to empty himself, outstare the darkness, and essentially "love us to death." *And* I am thankful that in this image of the Risen Christ we see a God who is always coming back into a world that does not even want God. *And*, surprisingly enough, I am thankful that I have come to a point in my life where I no longer wistfully say, "**Oh, if only to have lived in Jesus' days.**" I am thankful for an experience of a Cosmic Christ that alludes my instincts to capture and hold on to him. I am thankful to have encountered a Christ who can now break through to me in new and unexpected ways.

My question to *you* is this: What image of Jesus are you clinging to that is preventing you from more clearly seeing the Living Christ?

It is scary to let go of the familiar. It is scary to let go of that which we can touch and contain. Though scary, it can also be thrilling to let go and enter into the mystical stream of Christ's spirit around us. It can be motivating to perceive our connection with the created order, and our commonality with one another. It can be liberating to let go of our need to impress, and to prove our worth.

For those of you impressed with your scientific ability to debate what may or may not have happened in the tomb that first Easter morning, may this be your invitation to become an April Fool, and discover a Cosmic Christ that is more real than something you can cling to.

Amen.

John 20: 1 – 18 (NRSV)

The Resurrection of Jesus

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ˆSo she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, **“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”** ˆThen Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ˆThe two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ˆHe bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ˆThen Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ˆand the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ˆThen the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ˆfor as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ˆThen the disciples returned to their homes.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

ˆBut Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ˆand she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ˆThey said to her, **“Woman, why are you weeping?”** She said to them, **“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”** ˆWhen she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ˆJesus said to her, **“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”** Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, **“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”** ˆJesus said to her, **“Mary!”** She turned and said to him in Hebrew, **“Rabbouni!”** (which means Teacher). ˆJesus said to her, **“Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”** ˆMary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, **“I have seen the Lord”**; and she told them that he had said these things to her.