

## **“Do Not Hold On”**

**John 20:1-18**

**April 24, 2011**

**Easter Sunday**

**Collegiate Presbyterian Church**

### **The Resurrection of Jesus**

20 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. 2 So 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.” 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

### **Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene**

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and 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. 13 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.” 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 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.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, † “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus 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.’ ” 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Psalm 118

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

<sup>2</sup>Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

<sup>14</sup>The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

<sup>15</sup>There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

<sup>16</sup>the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”

<sup>17</sup>I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

<sup>18</sup>The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

<sup>19</sup>Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

<sup>20</sup>This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

<sup>21</sup>I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup>The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup>This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup>This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

#### Sermon

Early on in my ministry I just didn’t understand.

I didn’t understand why it was so important  
to some folks have the casket open.

It didn’t make sense theologically –

I had been taught in seminary  
how the service was a “witness to the resurrection”  
rather than a funeral for the dead.

And to me it didn’t make sense emotionally...

because at some point you have to face reality and say goodbye.

Though I don’t think I was ever insensitive

to a grieving family who wanted an open casket,  
I just didn’t understand.

Now I do.

You see, almost 20 years ago

my younger sister and her son died in a house fire.

The little that remained of their two story suburban home

had fallen into the basement...

and though we could still recognize many remnants of their lives –

pieces of furniture, a baseball bat, a dog kennel...  
my sister and my nephew were no longer there.

The day after the funeral I did something that was so unlike me –  
I went to the police station intent on seeing pictures of them.  
It was so unlike me, but I couldn't help myself.  
I felt like I needed their bodies.

God was good to me that day –  
the detective who had been one of the first responders  
happened to be an old high school friend.  
Having counseled many shocked and grieving people before,  
he persuaded me not to look at any pictures.  
And of course, he was right.  
Yet I left that day unsatisfied.  
Something in me needed to have their bodies.

Since then I've learned that this is something we share  
with people across many cultures.  
Why else would an international team of divers  
risk their lives in the turbulent waters off Norway  
to retrieve bodies from a crippled Russian submarine?  
Why else would the now quite elderly mothers  
of the “disappeared” in Chile, still gather to demand,  
“Give us a single bone of our children?”  
Why else would a father who lost two sons at Ground Zero,  
spend every day volunteering at the site?  
“I just want to get him home,”  
he said of his older son who hadn't been found.  
“I am so tired of coming down here and standing on honor guards.  
What we are looking for are his remains.”<sup>1</sup>

Because at times such as this, a body is tangible proof  
that our loved one is really dead.  
A body sometimes helps us learn how our loved one died.  
Having a body allows those of us left behind  
to feel like we have some control  
at a time when we're so out of control.

So, we can understand when John tells us that,  
“Early on the first day of the week,  
while it was still dark,  
Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.”  
He doesn't tell us precisely WHY she came...  
only that she came...  
and that she was empty-handed.  
No spices or ointments to anoint Jesus' body...  
Nicodemus had already done that on Good Friday.

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<sup>1</sup> Lipton, Eric and Glanz, James, *New York Times*, March 17, 2002

So, we can only assume it was grief and grief alone  
that brought Many Magdalene to the cemetery that morning.  
Grief... and her need to be near his body.

It's the same reason we all go there,  
to make sure it had really happened,  
to look once again at the huge stone,  
to remember all there is to remember,  
and to weep.

I am so grateful to John for remembering this part...  
so grateful the Bible understands  
that losing the ones we love is not easy...  
and that for all our believing they're in a better place...  
there's still the emptiness in this place.

So Mary went to the garden alone.  
Drawn there by grief... drawn there by love...  
and drawn there by her need for his body.<sup>2</sup>

Only, unlike our cemetery visits,  
when she got to his tomb something was wrong.  
The huge stone had been rolled away...  
the tomb was open...  
and to Mary, that meant only one thing:  
someone had stolen his body; whoever that someone was -  
the Romans, the Herodians, the Pharisees, the temple police –  
whoever they were, they had taken and hidden his body.

She ran back and told Peter and the beloved disciple,  
“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,  
and we do not know where they have laid him.”  
Peter and John raced to the tomb to see for themselves  
and when they got there, found it just as Mary had said.  
And then, in what has to be  
one of the biggest understatements in all of scripture,  
we're told that these two disciples turn and go back home...  
because they did not yet understand.  
Not to the ham and corn pudding and yeast rolls of Easter brunch...  
not to any kind of celebration of his resurrection...  
just back home... because they did not understand. Not yet.

Meanwhile, still worried about his body,  
Mary stood outside the tomb weeping inconsolably.  
Finally she decided to look in herself...  
and there she saw two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been.  
They ask her: “Woman, why are you weeping?”

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<sup>2</sup> This and much of what follows is inspired by “*Do Not Hold on to Me!*” a sermon by Jon Walton preached to the First Presbyterian Church of New York City, March 27, 2005.

Mary said, "They have taken away my Lord  
and I don't know where they've laid him."

Right about that time Jesus appeared behind her,  
though Mary didn't know it was him.

She thought he was the gardener.

He, too, asked her why she was weeping  
and again, she rehearsed her sad tale:

"Tell me if you know where he is, and I will take HIS BODY away."

"Mary," he said, with the same love and tenderness  
with which he had spoken her name so many times before.  
And hearing her name, her grief turned to surprise and then to joy  
and she called to him, "Rabbouni,"  
which means "Teacher."

Now, I have to say that what happens next  
is NOT my favorite part of this story.  
I would much prefer a long, tender embrace between these old friends  
but instead, when Mary moved toward him, he said to her,  
"Do not hold on to me...  
Do not hold on to me, Mary.

We can only imagine  
how confusing and hurtful  
these words must have sounded to her.  
She just wanted him back...  
she just wanted things to be like they were before -  
when they were traveling the roads of Galilee...  
when he was praying so eloquently...  
when he was teaching with such insight.  
She just wanted him back.  
And who can blame her?

But it couldn't be.  
Things were different now  
and the time for holding on to him had passed.

"Do not hold on to me," he tells her.  
It was THE HARDERST THING he could ask her to do,  
because it's all she wants... it's all WE want...  
to hold on to him... to have things the way they once were again.

Anyone who has grieved, or who is still grieving,  
knows that it's not just the dying that's hard...  
the "moving on with life" has its moments, too.

For the longest time, all you want is to hold on to the past.  
Every song sparks a memory...  
    every photograph launches a journey into the heart...  
    every holiday brings an aching in the soul.  
And then, sometimes without warning  
    the thoughts and the feelings wash over you  
    like a ten-foot wave leaving you gasping for breath.  
Folks sometimes talk about a “new normal,”  
    and that’s well and good,  
    but the truth is that all you want is the old one.

We all want to hold on to the past  
and treasure the way things once were  
    when the kids were little  
    and all they wanted to do is sit in our lap...  
when the grandkids were little  
    and all they wanted to do was visit Grammie and Gramps....  
when we were more carefree  
    and didn’t have so many responsibilities...  
when our marriage was intimate and exciting...  
when our bodies were less saggy here and less wrinkly there...  
when we went to the doctor every two years  
    rather than twice a week.  
We all want to hold on to before.

I wish we could turn the clock back *before* September 11, 2001.  
I wish we could have a re-do in Iraq and Afghanistan.  
I think about the oil and gas that was spewing out  
    of the Deepwater Horizon just one year ago...  
I think about the still unfolding catastrophe in Japan  
    and I wonder when the next shoe will drop.  
I worry about nukes in the hands of the North Koreans and Iranians.  
I wish we could go back ten or fifteen years  
    and institute the kind of regulations  
    that might have prevented the worst economic meltdown  
    since the Great Depression.

Like many of you,  
    I grew up believing our nation’s best days were ahead of us...  
but now I’m afraid for my three daughters...  
    and sometimes I just want to go back  
    and hold onto something that is no longer there.  
I fear the kind of nation they are inheriting.  
    I worry for our world and the direction it is going...  
    I worry about who’s in charge...  
and then I catch myself and remember who is REALLY in charge.

I catch myself and remember what this day is all about.

“Do not hold on to me.”  
It is the hardest thing he could ask Mary to do,  
yet it is what she has to do.  
You see, he knows that they can never go back to the way things were –  
he must return to his Father  
and she must go on and live the rest of her life.  
And it’s not that he’s leaving her alone to fend for herself.  
No, to send his Spirit to be her comforter,  
her advocate, her companion.<sup>3</sup>  
And perhaps most important,  
he has promised to be her teacher.  
If she will only trust him, he will still be her Rabbouni...  
he will still be her Teacher...  
going with her wherever she goes...  
teaching her whatever she needs to know...  
if only she will trust him.

The resurrection that we remember today -  
it’s not just one man’s triumph over death...  
it is the victory of God over all that would deny God’s love in the world.  
As we will affirm together in just few minutes,  
there is nothing to fear about the future.  
God will meet us in all that is yet to be  
in the same way God has met us in what has been.  
Ours is not to live in the past,  
but to go forth into the losses and uncertainties of the future  
confident of one thing –  
there is nothing, not even death,  
that can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus.  
For in the resurrection we remember today,  
God has taken the worst the world can do  
and transformed it by the best God can do.  
Now nothing can separate you from the love of God,  
not even death itself.  
So here is the news you have been waiting to hear...  
a secret that Gardeners and angels bear:  
The Lord is risen! He is risen, indeed!”

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<sup>3</sup> John 14:18-19, 25-31; John 15:26-27