

Holding On and Letting Go

John 20:1-18

Easter, March 27, 2005

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20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me..."

For all of its alleluias, Easter speaks a difficult word. After Jesus addresses Mary Magdalene by name, he says something that sounds quite harsh: **"Do not hold on to me."** Easter, it would seem, is about holding on and letting go.

Take the five-year-old to the bus stop for the first day. He has a new jacket and a brand-new backpack. His hair has been trimmed. His shirt has been tucked in one final time. Just over the hill, the big yellow bus appears. "Now, don't be afraid," Dad says, trying not to have his own fear discovered. They hug. They exchange goodbyes. He climbs up the steps. They wave again. And then Dad gets in the car to follow the bus. Have to make sure my son gets to school alright. It's hard to let go.

A family is divided in Florida. The son-in-law says, "Remove the feeding tube." Her parents say, "Leave it in." Their private dispute invites the politicians to preen for votes. The Supreme Court sides with the son-in-law. The demonstrators accuse him of looking like another Scott Peterson. His wife's brain stopped functioning fifteen years ago. All he wants to do is let her go. But a lot of people who have never even met his wife are having a hard time letting her go.

In any number of ways, many of us dwell in the drama of loss. We lose a job. A friend moves away. A relationship dies. The place of fond memories gets torn down. A co-worker retires and doesn't come back. There may be no more difficult human task than letting go.

Gerald May, the psychologist who writes of spiritual things, has confessed in one of his writings,

"I have never been able to positively let go of anyone or anything I really loved. Instead, things, people, self-images, god-images, and dreams have been taken away. And most of them have been left covered with my claw marks."¹

Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, **"Don't hold on to me."** But how can she help it? She lost him a few days before on that awful Friday, watching him nailed between two thieves. She stood with his mother and listened to him gasp for air. And then he dropped his head and it was over. She lost him then. And it hurt so bad that she might not have noticed that the afternoon sky was shrouded in darkness.

Then came the Passover, and then the Sabbath. And on the third day, she went to the one place where she knew his body would be. But he wasn't there. The stone that sealed his tomb had been rolled away. Full of panic, she ran into the city, found Simon Peter and another, and they returned to see if it was all true. It was true: the body of Jesus was gone. And the men returned quietly to their homes.

Easter begins there, with Mary weeping outside an empty tomb. There is no comfort in an empty grave. An empty tomb is deeply distressing. It is profoundly disturbing. Jesus is not where she expects him to be.

And then, when he appears to her, when he calls her by name, when he speaks in that familiar voice, he says, **"Don't hold on to me."** Easter is about letting go.

¹ "For They Shall Be Comforted," *Shalem News*, date unknown. Quoted in *Lectionary Homiletics*.

The Gospel of John gives at least one clue about what this means. According to the original Greek language, Jesus is literally saying, “Stop clinging to me,” which implies that she is already hanging on, that she is physically attached to him, and he’s telling her to cease. It’s striking that what prompts all this is when Mary calls him “Rabbouni,” or “My little teacher.” And he responds to her by saying, “Stop hanging on.”

The Old Jesus is gone. The wise-cracking teacher who told stories about prodigals and little lost lambs is gone. The Master who laughed at little Zaccheus and pushed the buttons in those self-righteous Pharisees – he is gone. That is the Jesus that they killed. This New Jesus is going back to the Father. Even with the nail holes still in his wrists and the pierced abdomen, he is raised up as the Lord. He has been bruised in the process – love can create all kinds of bruises – but he is no longer as we have known him. Mary Magdalene cannot hold on to her little Jesus any more, and neither can we. He is risen.

This is the simple truth that is the profound mystery of this day. The Risen Jesus cannot be held or controlled. He cannot be consumed or kept. He does not stay where we expect him to stay. He is alive and he is always ahead of us. That is deeply disturbing.

In our day, as in Mary Magdalene’s day, the people who are apt to be most disturbed by this are religious people. The Bible is the church’s book, but it does not back off from the fact that those who were chiefly responsible for getting Jesus killed were the church people. The religious people. These are the people who have clear expectations about what God does, and what God doesn’t do, and whom God associates with, and whom God rejects. Religious people often start kicking and screaming if you try something new; and then if it works out all right, they institutionalize the activity and call it “The Second Annual Pancake Breakfast.”

In everything we read in the Gospel of John, Jesus is remarkably free from the seatbelts of religion and tradition. Imagine how the religious people felt when Jesus shows up and he treats the Samaritan woman at the well like a human being, and he dismantles the miracle cure that the Temple is running on the side. He makes the blind man see, and dismantles the idea that disabled people are sinful. Then he raises Lazarus and puts the funeral industry out of business. The religious people huddle together, and they get really nervous, and then they decree, “We can’t have a Christ running loose on the streets. We have to nail him down.” And that’s what they do. They nail him down. But the Risen Christ doesn’t stay that way. It can be very unsettling.

When Great Britain was wondering if they should invade Iraq, Rowan Williams, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, preached an unsettling sermon on this text. “Don’t cling to me,” says Jesus. Williams said one of the ways that we cling to Jesus is “to be utterly sure” that we are always right. As the Archbishop puts it,

We want him where we can see him and manage him, so that we know exactly where to turn to be told that everything is all right and that he is on our side... We want to stand still and be reassured, rather than moving faithfully with Jesus along a path into new life whose turnings we don’t know in advance. (But) to have an absolute reassurance of our rightness somehow stands in the way of following Jesus to God.²

The Risen Jesus says, “Don’t cling to me; follow me.” But where are you going? And he says, “I am the Way.” And because he is ahead of us, and because his destination is beyond our human roadmaps, all we can do is follow. And if we follow, we have to give up every pretense that we know what we’re doing, that we know where we’re going. We have to let go of our human tendency to control our fear by acting like we are the ones in charge.

The Easter Christ says, “Don’t hold on to me.” It seems like he is calling for a great deal of trust. He is inviting Mary to let go and allow him to rule the world. He is inviting all the Marys of the world to trust that grace and truth are better ways to rule the world than clutching, control, or fear.

² Rowan Williams, “Do Not Cling to Me,” *Sojourners Magazine*, July-August 2003 (Vo. 32, No. 4, pp. 32-33, 46).

Listen, I'll say it again: this is a difficult word. It's especially difficult for the church. There are some churches that are so afraid of life that they are tempted to give you all the answers. They dismiss every question with propositions. They pretend to be so confident of everything. They'll try to convince you that God's ways are really an extension of our ways, that God is a Nice Old Grandfather who wants you to make a lot of money, find an obedient wife, and produce a couple of well-adjusted kids with straight teeth.

It never occurs to some people that the God of the Bible loves the poor who live in sheet-metal shacks in Haiti, that God drops by the daily A.A. meeting, that God is the nurse on call in the Alzheimer's wing. The Easter Christ is completely free to act with grace and truth.

I remember a teenager who spoke up on a youth retreat. It was late one night. We're sitting out in the middle of the woods in some shack, and we started talking about our favorite pictures of God. What is God like? It was quiet for a minute, and then this kid with pimples started telling the rest of us about a story he heard on the radio. Apparently there was an old man who picked through junk yards. He would pull out all kinds of things -- broken lampshades, tin cans. Then he would put on his goggles and pull out his welding torch, and he would build a new sculpture. He makes works of art right in the middle of all that wreckage.

Everybody looked at this kid. He said, "Don't you get it? God is always building something new out of broken things, out of discarded things. God is the original Junkyard Sculptor."

I said, "Where did you ever get this idea?" He said, "I think it comes from the Bible. Doesn't the Bible say, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing.'"³

It seems to me if you trust that God is saving the world, it's because you have let go of the idea that you're in charge of the world. In the words of the desert fathers, you're willing to let go of the heavy burden of self-justification. Instead of smothering other people and pretending that it's love, you're willing to let them flourish or fall because they have a Savior who is bigger than you. And rather than insist on winning every argument or proving that you're somehow better, you are willing to step back with a little humility; and whether it's a teachers' contract or an international war, maybe, in the name of Jesus, cooperation and community can win out over competition.

The Risen Christ says, "***Don't hold on to me.***" The Risen Christ says, "Don't smother me with your self-righteousness." The Easter Christ says, "Don't hang on to your old deadly ways. Let them go. Let go."

This is the invitation to trust. To trust that Jesus is ascending to his Father and our Father. To trust that the abundant life of God is stronger than the death of the world. Easter is the invitation to trust God enough that you let go of every burden and say goodbye to the old ways.

When you do this, when you let go and say goodbye, Jesus will come to you and say hello.

And it's Easter all over again.

³ Psalm 118:22-23