

Don't Hold On

Menno Mennonite Church

Easter, April 9 2023

Purpose: To invite all into the new light of the resurrected Christ

Message: As people of promise, we are always invited into the new thing that God is doing.

Scripture: John 20:1-18 [I will read]; Psalm 118:21-24 (Please read)

Synopsis: From the very first, there is that which we cling to. Our favorite stuffy, the ways and movements of the world as it should be, the things that we expect. Few things are more innately human than the inclination to hold on to that which gives us comfort.

Often our ideas of church and faith are included in this and rightly so. That which is timeless about faith is also the things that help ground us to the experience of life in Christ. Yet Jesus calls us always to recognize that faith is also something that is always growing and moving at the very same time. Mary is ready to hold onto what she thought was lost—the teacher that she loves. Yet Jesus asks her to let go so that the work of God can continue. How might we as a church be invited, too, to let go that new life might be fully known?

See: <https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury/sc-free-2023-04-03?e=bb2eb3579c>

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.

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.

A decade so ago or so, you could not get on a plane without being surrounded by people reading about Jesus. Or a version of Jesus at any rate in the form of Dan Brown's thriller *The Davinci Code*. If you, I didn't spare the time for the book itself—the best I could do was the movie once it hit cable—I will take you back for a synopsis. The whole mystery revolves around Mary Magdalene, much like our story for this morning. Only for Mr. Brown Mary become the target of a multi-millennia cover up by the church to prevent the world to find out that Jesus had been married to and had children with Mary Magdalene.

While that would be admittedly be a shocking revelation were it to be true, and quite the re-write to the history books, I think it is the stuff, fully, of fiction both factually and as a matter of doctrine. What makes the *Davinci Code* simultaneously laughable and disruptive is the notion that were this revelation proven true it, by its disruptive nature would make the case for faith null and void *because it would prove that Jesus was human*. But then you take a moment and think about what we say about Jesus, and you realize that this is hardly breaking news let alone the dead secret of the illuminati. For centuries weekly Christian worship has made this plain as it is recited in the Nicene Creed: that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary and was made human.” The popular wisdom supposes that Christianity is founded on some deep dark cultic secret that only the true insider *really* knows to make the whole thing work (followed by the utterly cynical inclination to believe it to be a lie). Yet week after week, year after year, never more so than today we state clearly what the essence is: that Jesus died and on the third day was raised from the dead. Without real death, there also cannot be a real return to life. Without a real humanity, there cannot be a real Easter to celebrate. You just cannot crank up any true joy unless the human being who had been Jesus of Nazareth not only had the utterly human ability to die but he really did get to that mortal point when the body's automatic functions stop being automatic and death becomes real.

We know that death is real. Anyone who has had to encounter the reality of one dear to them knows the bit of craziness and incomprehension that goes with it. You can't fix it. You can't make it go away. Even as we live in hope of God's good life, we know the pain that comes with simply not being able to reach them directly anymore. This is our human lot, and it was Jesus' human lot. So if he was just that dead, just that irretrievably gone to those who loved him, but even so was returned by the God who is faithful in all things, then that is the full good news

that we celebrate today. Death in all its forms does sting, but that sting in the context of God has lost its finality and is mitigated in its fullness. We believe that Jesus was fully divine and fully human. But theologically we have been proclaiming for more than 2000 years that it was the power of God the Father that did for Jesus what Jesus as the human one could not do for himself. It is God who raised him up; even the reality of his divine nature did not of itself automatically mean that Jesus would not stay dead. Jesus was raised by the faithfulness of the one who created him, formed him and sent him. It is our firm hope and direct expectation that that same God will raise us up as we follow the same path, whether the death we suffer are physical, emotional, social, societal or any other shape this fact of human life might take. God in Christ reclaims death and proclaims that where God is involved, it shall not have the final word.

That is what makes John 20 and the amazement it portrays for us so authentic, so familiar. There are no pre-dawn earthquakes and soldiers fainting for freight. Like all four gospels, we have no description of Jesus emerging from the tomb resurrected as a play-by-play itself. John keeps the whole story on the level of human expectations precisely because when those expectations are so utterly and profoundly shattered by what God has done our amazement alongside that of those who witness it can be all the greater.

John's story is simple. Mary treks to the tomb just to be there. On noticing the rolled away stone, she knows something is going on and goes to fetch the others. Little investigation was needed—it is just what had happened. Peter and the beloved disciple come to the same conclusion upon fuller investigation. When you look at it together, the collected conclusion that the three arrive at was not necessarily that something fishy had happened, not necessarily that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Just that something pronouncedly fishy was going on.

They leave Mary then crying as they return confused, weeping herself blind over the latest indignity to the one she loves. It is here that Jesus in disguise asks twice why she is crying. It is we who apply the inflection of the exasperated parent wanting their child to stop, look around, and see that they are sitting on the stuffy they fear they have lost. We know the story. She does not. Jesus knows better than anyone that Mary's tears beyond being those of her own fear and grief, are also the tears of a weary humanity spilling forth the tears of so much wrong, so much loss. Mary is crying because she must cry. It is the only human response to the losses we each suffer.

Jesus himself knew that he and Mary both needed the tears if the truth of what had just happened was going to come to mean exactly what it still means: we have the hope of new life smack where we need it most: in the midst of a world full of death and dying. Not one of us weeps without cause. Not one of us will escape this world without loss. Easter doesn't happen amidst the well decked sanctuary and the happy celebrations of the day, in the midst of the traditions and connections that make it what it is. Easter happens where the worst of life finds us, where loss in all its forms is made known. Easter happens in the places and times that we wish we could forget, but likely never will. Easter happens where our deaths happen because that, precisely, is where Easter is needed. It is there that life is given, even when it is least expected.

John's Easter is not done with us quite yet. I don't know about you, but I have always thought Jesus a hugger. Not in a bad way, but someone who through compassion and humanity knows the power of a good squeeze. Once Mary finally is brought to see who is speaking to her, she does the only human thing: she leaps to her feet and turns to embrace the teacher. If we are given to hugging complete strangers when the game winning homerun come through at the bottom of the ninth, even if it is not your thing, the one who you knew to be the Messiah, who you knew to be dead, and you now know to be alive *requires* a hug. It requires that we hold on the best we can, and never let go. So Jesus' no touching policy brings things to a stop. Were you composing the soundtrack for this scene to underscore the action, it is right where you would have to dampen your crescendo of hope into nothing at all.

What are we to make of that? Perhaps, it means for now we cannot fully grasp Easter yet. No matter how hard we try or how hard we believe, there is something in us that struggles with the imagination of life beyond death. "You can't hold me; not yet" Jesus says. There is little doubting that this was precisely what Mary wanted to do most. To hold on and never let go. To keep him and sit there for hours in all things, soaking in the reality of having the one who she lost now beside her again. Now she has to let him go to continue the work that he began in life and continues now in death.

How very powerful that temptation is for us to hold onto to Jesus. Just as Mary is the stand-in for humanity's grief in discovering the empty tomb, so too is she the proxy for wishing to hold on to Jesus. We do it all the time. We get a glimpse of Jesus in our experiences, in the

instances of our theology, the elegance of our orthodoxy, the notions of our youth, the traditions that we know and love. When we recognize the savior in that glimpse, we are given to hanging on the best we can, trying to replicate that moment of revelation and knowledge. We do this as individuals, as congregations, as whole movements of faith who find our way and hesitate to change it. It is hard to know what to do with a Lord and Savior who, now risen, insists on being alive, insists that we let him go and be do what he always has: the work of building the kingdom of God. It is easy to forget that this is not the end of the story; it is but the middle with the very best yet to come. It is hard to wait patiently on the Lord who we so much want to fully grasp, yet somehow escapes us. The work of faith is to expect Christ calling us forward in faith to see what is yet to be revealed.

Still the good news is that life continues, even in the most deathly of situations. John's drama closes with Mary running back to where the other disciples are and becomes the first proclaimer of the Christian Church in her declaration that she "has seen the Lord." He has been seen, he is alive, even if he remains beyond our reach. We in faith join her in this proclamation not because we can explain it in calm, rational language that causes it to make sense in the conventional way but because it is our experience and what we simply know to be true. We have seen the Lord, and that makes all the difference.

This story does what Jesus himself always did and still does: he come up behind us in a world that brings us to weep, calls us by name, and points us to the grand thing that God has done and will do yet again. We can no more prove that today than Mary could that first Easter, nor should we try. We cannot hold Jesus to the spot to hold him, encapsulate him, know him.

But we have seen the glory of Easter. It might have been through the sparkling of tears, refracting into our hears through only indirect means, but we have seen it. And we know it. For we have seen the Lord, and follow him on where he yet leads. It is not yet complete, but for now it is enough. Thanks be to God.