



Easter 2014

John 20:1-18

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

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 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.

It's a dream I've had more than once. I'm on the land around my former farmhouse in Maine, the house that for so long was the geographical centre of my heart. I walk up to the front door and as I do so, I look towards the cove: a tiny inlet bounded by what used to be an apple orchard running down to the water's edge. The tide is coming in something fierce, with whitecaps all around. I bound up the front steps and put my hand on the doorknob. I'm wired. I'm about to go into the house of my longing, the house with its little bead board kitchen, an office that looks out over the cove, a door from the kitchen that opens onto a magical barn: the house within which I lived as a married person and from which I discovered nature anew as an adult. I turn the knob, thinking of all these things, anticipating returning to all of these things...then I wake up.

This, of course, is just a dream, the dream of one person: a woman who moved from a place and a house that she loved some ten years ago, that, even now, she cannot completely forget. But within this dream and its abrupt and unfulfilling ending is part of the message of our Easter Gospel for this morning, part of the Easter message that has your name and my name on it: though we yearn to hold onto the people and places and circumstances we have loved, resurrected life is not about holding on to what was. Instead, resurrected life is giving ourselves over to the dynamic process of newness as we follow the risen Lord into a future we can neither imagine nor completely control.

In our Gospel for today, it's early in the morning on the Sabbath, the first day of the week. It's still dark, John tells us, which means that people are still "in the dark" about many things. Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb and, even in the dark, can see that something is wrong: the stone at the mouth of the tomb has been rolled away. She runs and tells Peter and John what she believes has happened: that grave robbers have taken Jesus' body. After racing to the tomb where they too see that the body is gone, they simply return home.

But Mary doesn't leave; she cannot leave. She weeps outside the tomb and, upon finally looking inside, sees angels who question her about why she's weeping. Her answer is the same as before. She is weeping because she believes someone has stolen Jesus' body. But before the angels have a chance to say anything else to her, she senses that someone is outside the tomb, someone she assumes is the caretaker of the garden.

"Why are you weeping?" the man asks, but then adds another question: "Whom are you looking for?"

But then everything shifts.

"Mary" the man says, and she knows immediately who he is. She replies "Rabbouni (which means "my beloved teacher"), the familiar way she might have addressed Jesus while he was alive. But then he says something to her that I believe is directed towards us well on this Easter morning. "Don't hold onto me," he says, for she has already reached out her hand to grasp him. "Don't hold onto me."

"Don't hold onto me." It has to be a very hard thing for Mary to hear from the one she so wants to hold and hold onto. After all, in this story she alone comes to the tomb to be near his body and stays at the tomb craving to find his body, the one thing still left of him and the life she shared with him.

And then, to be told not to grasp him, not to hold onto him. How strange and even cruel. What does it mean for her and for us to be told not to cling, not to grasp, not to hold onto him?

Jesus is telling her, and, I believe, is telling us, that resurrected life is not a life fixed on the past, no matter how right the past was. No, resurrected life looses our grasp on the past and invites us, or at times rudely pushes us, to travel empty handed into a future with the risen Christ.

And so on this Easter morning, as we hear John's dream-like story, a resurrection account that occurs before the first light, as we bring with us everything we would like to be able to hold onto in our lives—the people, the places, the circumstance—as we do these things, listen to the words of Jesus, in all their seeming strangeness as he speaks about those very people and places and circumstances and how resurrected life actually works. “Don't hold onto them” he says to us. “Don't hold onto them.”

Doing what he says will not be easy, for loosing our grasp on who and what we are attached to can feel like death itself. This is because our attachments, like Mary's attachment to Jesus, have been good and life-giving.

And, of course they have been particular—for we never attach to something in a generic way, do we? Rather, just like my beloved farmhouse in Maine, each of our attachments has its own particularities that have hold of us. Each has a particular look and sound and smell and feel connected to it. To let go of these particularities in order to go forward in an empty-handed way—how can we do it?

The only one who can help us is the one who gives us an image to hold onto even as we are letting go of someone or something precious to us. This morning that image is the Easter image of the one who has passed through death into life, who has gone from being “Rabbouni” that is “dear Teacher” to being proclaimed as “Kurios,” that is “the Lord,” the one whose presence will fill all things, making it possible to move into a future that we have not as yet imagined and will never completely control.

“I have seen the Lord.” Mary says to the men that Jesus now refers to as his brothers. “I have seen the Lord.” What she gives us in this proclamation is an image of a crucified and risen God who, himself, has walked the path of holding onto his life and letting it go only to have it returned to him in a new way.

In my favorite movie of all times [*Cinema Paradiso*](#), we hear the strongest of messages, a message that may strike our ears as cruel, about letting go in order to receive a new life. In one scene, the elderly Alfredo is talking to the young man Toto about Toto's future. Alfredo and Toto have known each other since Toto was a precocious school boy in a small town in Italy, a boy wanting to learn anything he could about the movies. Alfredo, as the projectionist in the town's one and only movie theatre, teaches Toto all that he knows. This leads Toto to buy his own camera and film the life of the quaint village he grows up in and to discover his gifts in the making of films.

In one scene Toto has returned to his village after serving in the Army. He goes to visit his old friend Alfredo, and the two walk along a beach littered with the fishing implements used by those who have lived and worked in the village all their lives. Toto is laughing and joking with Alfredo just like old times, and it begins to seem as if this talented young man will remain in the village, taking back up his job as projectionist in the little theatre there. It seems this way until all, at once, Alfredo turns to Toto and shouts:

“Get out of here! Go back to Rome. You're young and the world is yours.I don't want to hear you talk anymore. I want to hear others talking about you. Don't come back. Don't think about us. Don't look back. Don't write. Don't give in to nostalgia. Forget us all. If you do...come back, don't come see me. I won't let you in my house. Understand? Whatever you end up doing, love it—the way you loved the projection booth when you were a little (boy).”

“Don't hold onto to me.” Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, the first person he speaks to after his resurrection. He says this to her and to us not to be insensitive and cruel but because God forever goes before us into the future and asks us, needs us to follow him there ready, as brothers and sisters of the Lord of Life, ready and empty handed, empty handed and ready.