

John 20:1–18 (NET—modified)

Now very 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 moved away from the entrance. So she went running to Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved and [panting] told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” Then Peter and the other disciple set out to go to the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down and saw the strips of linen cloth lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter, following, arrived and went right into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen cloth lying there, and the face cloth, which had been around Jesus’ head, not lying with the strips of linen cloth but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, came in, and he saw and believed [what Mary had told them, that he was missing]. (For they did not yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead.)

So the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she bent down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus’ body had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” Mary replied, “They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put 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? Who are you looking for?” Because she thought he was the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will take him.” Jesus said to her [softly], “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “*Rabboni*” (which means Teacher). Jesus replied, “Do not [cling to] me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene came and informed the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them what Jesus had said to her.

Do Not Cling to Me

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: April 20, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: John 20:1-18

I'm one of those people who hate to get up in the morning. I'm happy to stay up to all hours reading or writing or just about anything, but I hate getting up before 8:00. So, Easter sunrise services are always an effort for me. Many of you must feel the same way, since there seems to be little interest even in a sunrise service that with great poetic license usually starts at 7:30.

But in the spring of 1980 I found myself motivated to go to an Easter sunrise service, a real Easter sunrise service. I had heard about a magnificent service at a place called the Cathedral of the Pines in Rindge, NH. [Slide 1] The Cathedral is an outdoor overlook, with a great sweeping view that looks across southern NH valleys to the face of Mt. Manadnock in the distance. It is an arresting site.

The sunrise service at the Cathedral of the Pines, at least in those days, didn't begin at sunrise; it ended at sunrise. Every hymn, prayer, and the scripture reading, and the sermon was precisely timed such that on the final line of the final verse of the final hymn the sun would rise over the mountain and announce Easter morning. It was as though the service had beckoned forth the resurrection.

A little calculation is in order. At the time I lived about an hour and fifteen minutes from Rindge, NH. Allowing time to park and so on, allow an hour and forty-five minutes. The service was an hour long. Sunrise was at 6:00. So, that put leaving home 2 hours and 45 minutes before sunrise, in other words at 3:15, much closer to my normal bedtime than my normal getting-up-time.

But I was motivated. I had just accepted an offer of admission to Harvard Divinity School. This was going to be a celebration of my call to ministry. The splendor of the Easter sunrise in the gorgeous NH mountains would pale, I was sure, to the inner fireworks God would make me feel on that auspicious morning.

As the chilly service progressed under the light of flashlights, the eastern sky began to reveal that this morning would be unusually clear. Everything was perfect. As the sun crested the mountain, there would be nothing to block its glory. The last hymn came. So did the last verse, then the last line, and then the sun in its full brilliance, first peeking, then exploding over the mountain, spilling gold light into and across the valleys. "Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!" Everything was perfect. Beautiful. Gorgeous. But there were no fireworks. None. Nothing. I was mostly cold and tired, perplexed and disappointed, and not a little filled with self-doubt. [advance slide]

Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb on that first Easter morning, it is fair to say with much lower expectations. As the passage says, none of them had yet come to believe. Mary is paying her respects to her dead teacher.

But in the pre-dawn light she can see that the stone has been moved. Someone has taken the body, adding insult to injury. She runs to the disciples and breathlessly relates the crime. Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb to see for themselves. They look into the tomb and

see that, indeed, Mary is right. Jesus' body is missing. Only the wrapping cloths remain. Cold and tired, the two disciples go home filled with gloom. Just when they thought it couldn't get worse, they realize that Jesus' enemies haven't even let the dead rest in peace.

Mary, equally despondent, remains at the tomb weeping. Then comes the most familiar and beloved part of the story.

Mary 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?" Because she thought he was the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will take him." Jesus said to her [softly], "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, *Rabboni* (which means Teacher).

It is surely one of the tenderest moments in all the Gospels. Mary, heartbroken, bereft, utterly without hope suddenly understands that she is in the presence of the risen Christ. Just when all seems lost, Jesus is standing there. What had been lost is found. What had been dead is now alive. It is easy to imagine that fireworks are exploding in Mary's head, dazzling colored umbrellas of bursting light.

The text implies that Mary fell to her knees and then reached out touch her risen Lord. Such a tender gesture, reaching out with love and relief.

And then the almost unthinkable happens. Just at the moment of Jesus' return and Mary's relief, Jesus abruptly, and none too sweetly, says, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father."

This moment has troubled readers for centuries. After all, a few verses later Jesus invites Thomas to put his hand in his side. There have been all kinds of explanations, most of which aren't worthy of Jesus. For example, some interpreters have said that because Thomas was a man he could touch the risen Jesus but that a woman couldn't. As our vice-president would say, malarkey.

The meaning is actually quite clear, I think. Mary has responded just as any of us would have. Jesus, whom she thought was dead, has now returned to her. He is alive. He is standing right there in front of her. He is talking to her, calling her by name. The thing she most desired, that Jesus be not dead, has occurred. She falls to her knees in gladness.

Then just as abruptly as he had appeared to her and given her what she most wanted, Jesus takes it all away from her. Do not cling to me. Yes, I am standing here. But no, we're not going to pick up where we left off three days ago. No, we are not going to walk together with the disciples through the countryside of Galilee and Judea teaching and healing anymore. No, it's not going to be like it used to be. In what almost seems cruelty, Jesus throws water on Mary's fireworks and they sputter and fizzle. They become damp, smoldering ash. The old days are dead and gone after all. Or better said, recovering the old days isn't where all this is going.

And that's a very good thing, I think. I suppose most of us have an idea of what would set off the fireworks for us. But the truth is, we're wrong, and we know deep inside that we're wrong. The writer Perry Noble says, "I think people are searching for fulfillment and meaning through their own efforts—jobs, money, cars, kids, hobbies—whatever the next big thing might be." He goes on to note that Americans are the wealthiest and most depressed people on earth. I'm not sure how that fact is measured, but it sounds right to me. We are the wealthiest and yet the most depressed people on earth. Even we, who are lucky enough to have what we need and much of what we want and think will bring us peace, even we find that these attainments leave us cold and tired and disappointed. We cling to them, and yet no skyrockets explode. Jesus

understood that Mary needed to move on to a new stage in her spiritual development. Do not cling to this stage, he told her.

Clinging to things that can never deliver what we most desire leaves us locked in the tomb. But even if we don't spend our lives grasping after material things, even if we live a more simple life, even if we try to pay attention to only the things that really matter, life will break our hearts, much as Mary's heart was broken. You won't get to Easter simply by getting your priorities right in life.

I know a young woman whose tragic story brings tears to my eyes. When she was a child, four years old, her mother had another baby. The birth was hard. She lost a lot of blood. It was in the early days of the AIDS pandemic, and when the woman regained her strength after the long recovery from the hard birth, they informed her that she had contracted the virus. A loving family and the loving community they lived in were torn apart. Friends would no longer visit. Other parents protested about the little girl going to school. When she went swimming, everyone left the pool, and then they drained it to clean it. After four years the virus took the mother's life. The girl's father was lost and inconsolable. He wasn't really able to be a parent to his children, and alcohol made things worse, much worse. At eight years old, the little girl became the de-facto head of the house. She did what she needed to do to survive. She grew into a woman. But God seemed to have abandoned her, and she had no idea how to make sense of the promises of Easter. Surely it would be cruel to say that resurrection is just a promise for the next life. If that were true, why even bother with this life, especially one so painful? But even more surely, the resurrection wasn't about restoring to her the family she deserved in this life. She had a lifetime of evidence to prove that wasn't the case.

If restoration of what you have lost were the Easter message, if Mary at the tomb had been able to cling to Jesus, keep him here, and resume his life with his disciples; what would that have said to this young woman? That some people get fireworks, but not you? That some people get back what they lose, but not you? Happy Easter? And of course, the truth of the matter is this: maybe not all of us have such difficult lives as this young woman, but we all know the sorrow of a broken heart. And Easter doesn't suddenly reverse our losses.

So this is the reality in which we face the empty tomb on Easter morning. Our achievements and aspirations, even our best ones, don't deliver fireworks. And no matter how much we want it, Easter will not undo the things that break our hearts. Mary encountered that, and so do we.

In the first case, the answer is rather easy to grasp. Do not cling to things that will never deliver on their promise of fireworks. The second is a bit more challenging. Mary was told not to cling even to what she loved. She was told, in effect, that nothing in this life escapes, in Paul's words, death and corruption.

Jesus' words seem harsh and unsettling. But they point us toward the only realistic hope we can have. On its own terms, this world cannot give us peace. "My peace I give you, but not as this world gives do I give to you." But make no mistake. Jesus isn't talking only about peace in the afterlife. He is saying that there is peace in this life, but to find it one must let go, not cling to, doing things on the world's terms. I think this is hard to understand, and surely it isn't easy to do. To move beyond what the world gives is to leap into the unknown, to leap to what we cannot see or prove. Like the bedclothes in the Easter tomb, we can glimpse it only in what's absent or what's left behind. We can only see it out of the corner of our eye.

That leap is what John has in mind when he uses the word belief so many times. But John does not mean, does not ever mean, that believing in Jesus is like believing in the Easter Bunny

or Santa Claus. It's to take a leap believing that if we let go of our vain attempts acquire peace, or if we let go of our hope that the losses of our life will be restored in some simple form, that rather than utter despair, we will find ourselves in the embrace of a love we cannot understand. It does not erase the sorrow, but somehow, by grace, makes it into something else we cannot fully describe or fathom.

We can begin right here, right now. Like learning to leap from a diving board, it's probably best to start easy. So, let's do it. Relax. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath in and let it go out all the way. Imagine one of your smaller sorrows, disappointments or misplaced hopes. Maybe a loss you can't restore. A strained relationship. Or maybe that BMW you are sure would lift your spirits. And then imagine saying something like, I'm going to loosen my grip on this, I'm going to cling less to this, I am going to open my hands and let this go, and I am going to trust that God will catch me when I fall. I am going to accept this painful loss or disappointment. Or I am going to admit to myself that that BMW won't give me peace. And I'm going to trust that a love beyond anything I can describe will keep me safe when I let go.

Now, just think, you can do this every day, almost anywhere. It's portable. And guess what's going to happen. Just at the moment that you don't really care about it anymore, at the moment you've done such a good job of letting go into the arms of God, you will see the most glorious fireworks you can imagine. But don't cling to them. For, they will disappear if you do. Just smile at the blessed irony of our Easter faith. Christ the Lord is risen today, alleluia. Amen.