

April 20, 2003  
Easter Sunday  
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### Do Not Hold On to Me!

John 20:1-18      *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...."*

#### The Mystery of the Resurrection

Easter is the mystery of the resurrection of Christ. Death is not the final word. The tomb could not restrain the spirit, the life of Jesus. God's power of new life, God's empowering love, is stronger than all human power to kill, destroy, or dehumanize. Easter proclaims to us the mystery of God's power of new life.

Easter is not about proofs of the resurrection, but encountering today, in our own lives, the living Christ. The gospel stories do not try to present proofs, but instead preserve the mystery of the resurrection. They don't try to persuade us or convince us. Instead, they can awaken in us sensitivity to the presence of the living Christ. We need to come to the resurrection stories with hearts and minds open to being encountered by the risen Christ, hearing him call our names, hearing him call us to follow him.

#### Mary's Love for Jesus: Her Grief

In John's gospel a woman as the central figure in the resurrection story. Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the resurrection. In those days, a woman's testimony didn't count for anything, legally or otherwise. Mary's being the first to meet the risen Christ is itself a proclamation of the gospel. Jesus broke through all conventions and laws so that all people might taste God's love and mercy. Jesus not only rose from a literal tomb; he lived in such a way that all deadening bonds were broken so that all people could be freed by God's love.

What little we know of Mary Magdalene is from the Gospel of Luke. We are told that Jesus cast demons out of her. She had experienced his healing, restorative power. She was part of the circle of followers in Galilee. Now she is about to be the first to witness his resurrection.

Mary discovers the empty tomb, and becomes distraught. Not only has Jesus been killed by the political and religious powers, and abandoned by his closest followers, but also his body, she assumes, has been snatched from the tomb. Mary rushes to tell Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved," that is, the gospel writer himself. The two men, typically competitive, have a foot race to the tomb. We are not told what Peter's response is. The other disciple "believes." But John leaves us the impression that neither understood at this point what was going on. So, off they go.

Mary, however, remains at the tomb, weeping uncontrollably. She stays with her grief. And this is what John wants to focus on. We are to encounter the living Christ through Mary and her responses. "Mary stood weeping outside the tomb," writes John. We begin to get a deep insight into Mary. Her grief is intense. It flows from her love for Jesus. This is a central theme for John's gospel. Jesus wants to share love with his disciples, the very love that comes from God. In John 15, he says, "As the Father has

loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love.” This love is deeper than emotion. It is a kind of inter-dwelling of Jesus and God and us. Mary has known the life and love that come from God through Jesus. And his death has broken her heart and shattered her spirit.

I think Mary’s grief is not just that Jesus has been killed. For Mary there is the loss of a whole sense of meaning. It wasn’t just the death of Jesus’ body, but the violence done to all that he stood for and all that Mary had come to believe in and through him. Maybe it was all a wish-dream. Maybe the destructive, violent, and self-serving forces in the world are too great after all. Maybe we’ve been where Mary was on that dark morning. The outward circumstances of life overwhelm us, or at least shake our confidence in Christ and all he means. It may be our disillusionment—with people, with the world, with religion, with the church, with ourselves. Or perhaps it is just the grinding down effect that life can have. Mary’s words may be echoing in our own hearts: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

This scene is so profound! John has given us a great gift by letting us remain at the tomb with Mary, weeping. It is an affirmation that the life of faith includes times of being shaken, grieving, feeling overwhelmed or wondering if maybe we’re just on the wrong track. Because we experience such times does not mean we are not faithful people! One of the Beatitudes fits Mary so well: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” It’s a special kind of mourning. It is the heartbrokenness we feel when we see how far we human beings are from the kind of life manifested in Christ. It is grief for the world, for ourselves. Those who let themselves experience this kind of grief will be comforted. Part of our love for Christ is our grief when the love he embodied and taught is crucified by our littleness of vision and hardness of heart.

Mary’s grief comes from her deep love for Jesus. She represents what it means to be a Christian, a follower of Christ. It means loving Christ at the center of our being, because we know from him comes fullness of life. And it means knowing the grief of seeing him crucified in the world and in our own lives.

### From Grief to Joy

Mary’s love also makes her sensitive to Jesus’ presence, as we will now see. Even seeing two angels in the tomb doesn’t help Mary in her grief. She turns to see a man she takes to be a gardener. He asks her why she is weeping and who she is looking for. She pleads with him: If you have taken his body, just tell me where you put it! Then everything changes. Jesus calls Mary by name. He spoke to her before, but it is only as Jesus calls her name that Mary immediately knows him: “Teacher!” Her love for Jesus caused her such grief and suffering at his death. Now her love for him makes her sensitive to his presence. It is not a matter of proofs of his resurrection that convince the mind. It is a matter of love.

Earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus teaches about the good shepherd who knows each sheep by name. The shepherd calls to them and leads them out to good pastures. “I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus. “I know my own, and they know the sound of my voice.” When we are lost in our grief, our sadness, our loss of a confident faith, when we feel overwhelmed by the circumstances of our lives or of the world, we can listen for that voice, keeping ourselves, as best we can, ready to hear our names called by the one who knows us and cares for us, who gives us life. The living Christ calls us by name, and

awakens us from our grief. The voice that reclaims and awakens us comes through something or someone ordinary and near. The circumstances that spoke only of death and hopelessness are suddenly cast into the light of the deep and abiding power of life.

### Do Not Hold On to Me

Finally, a strange thing happens. In her joy, Mary must have moved to embrace Jesus. Why wouldn't she rush to throw her arms around Jesus? Lost to her once, she was not about to lose him again. Who can blame her? Once we have found something that makes life worthwhile, that again fills our lives with joy, hope, and meaning, don't we want to hang on tight, to make it a possession?

But Jesus responds: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not finished my work. I must still ascend to the Father. Go and tell my brother that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Jesus is always moving on. We want to hang onto him. Once we've experienced the living Christ and through him God's undying love for us and the world, we want to make it a permanent experience. We want to close our hearts, our minds, our lives around Jesus and keep him there.

The living Christ is with us as the one who is moving on, calling us, just as he did in his earthly life, to follow him. He is not a possession. Instead, he possesses us and leads us into the ministry of his love. It is in this non-possessing discipleship to the living Christ that we find the deepest peace and joy. Christ is not to be "held on to" but "followed in faith." That's how we encounter him. Not in a doctrine of the resurrection, or in some proof that removes all doubt or uncertainty, but in his voice that calls our names and in the path of discipleship he opens up for us.

We encounter the mystery of the resurrection as we center our lives in our love of Christ, as we embrace the grief of his suffering in the world, as we listen in the very midst of our grief for his voice calling us by name, and as we take up once again the journey of following him. Christ is risen! The living Christ is present with us, calling each of us by name, leading and lifting us out of the valleys of our grief and fear. But this present, living Christ is also the one who leads us on in the ways of his service.