

Do Not Hold On to Me

John 20:1-18 *Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father....”*

In John’s story of the resurrection, we see Mary Magdalene’s deep love for Jesus. You see it in her inconsolable tears as she stands outside his tomb. She grieves the loss of her teacher, her friend, the one who was showing her what life is really about. His death struck deep in her soul. As if his execution by the religious and political powers-that-be weren’t enough, now his body is gone! There is desecration on top of death.

I think we can all identify in some way with Mary’s grief. Don’t we feel sometimes as though our faith has died? It may be the effect of personal struggles that have overwhelmed us. Or conditions in society and the world weigh so heavy on our inner life that what we’ve held to be beautiful, good, and truthful seems not only lost but also trampled under foot. The world of power politics and greed economics is killing off truth and life every day. The religious world isn’t much better. Religious extremists, including Christians, are having a grand time stirring up hate and violence. Jesus is still being crucified by those who claim to be his followers but ignore his teachings and exhibit nothing of his spirit. All of this can leave us spiritually depleted. We may at times wonder if we can still BE Christians with any integrity, much less with confidence and joy. So we may find ourselves weeping with Mary as she stands outside Jesus’ tomb.

Mary peers into the tomb and sees two angels in white, though she doesn’t recognize them as divine messengers. They ask her, “Mary, why are you weeping?” and she becomes unglued; her grief pours out: “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him!” We respond this way sometimes when we have been carrying around inside us a heavy load of unshared suffering, and someone asks us in a genuine and kind way if we are all right. It uncorks our bottled-up emotions.

I reflected this week on Mary’s concern with Jesus’ body. In her desperation, she just seems to want something to hang onto, even if it’s a corpse. Having just gone through the death of Kaye’s mother, I thought about funeral practices in our society. A lucrative industry has built up around preserving the body and grieving over the body. Our bodies ARE very important. We are EMBODIED beings, incarnated spirits. That’s how we enjoy life, relate to each other, and generally experience the fullness of life as God made it for us to live. We identify ones we love by

their physical appearance and presence. Bodily death is therefore a deep shock. The embodied person is no longer there to relate to.

When my mother-in-law died, the first time we really missed her was when we wanted to call her about something, to let her know we had gotten home safely or to tell her some piece of news. You miss the embodied person. However, when we walked into the church sanctuary for the visitation for Mildred, none of us in the family felt like Mildred was there in the casket. “She” was somewhere, but not there. We missed her deeply and could no longer “connect” with her as when we would walk into her home for a visit and give her a hug. But there was nothing about that corpse that we could connect with. Her “life” was somewhere else. I think that Mary was simply aching for Jesus’ presence, and finding his body seemed at least some way to hold onto him.

Then she turns around and sees Jesus standing there. But she doesn’t know it is Jesus. She takes him for the gardener. The gospel writers are very careful about these things. They don’t try to prove the resurrection. They don’t try to show us a photograph of the scene. They tell their stories in ways that preserve the absolute mystery of the resurrected presence of Jesus. There is still something incarnational about him—he looks like a gardener. He is present in an ordinary, common way. Yet, there is something different about him, something that lives beyond and shines through all the violence and hate and death he had undergone and that we undergo, something that speaks to our hearts that those things don’t last and they don’t have any real truth and power about them.

Why are you crying? asks Jesus. Who are you looking for? Maybe this gardener moved Jesus’ body or helped someone do it for some reason. If you took his body away, just tell me where and I’ll take it off your hands! Then Jesus speaks her name: Mary! And everything changes. In speaking her name, Jesus reawakens the relationship of love between Mary and himself. She does not find him out; he seeks and finds her, reveals himself to her. She gasps a response: Rabbouni! Rabbi! Teacher!

Jesus speaks our names, too. Didn’t Jesus say also in John’s gospel that the good shepherd knows each sheep by name? The living Christ calls us by name, lets us know of his presence, and renews our relationship with him. Yet our love for him also makes us sensitive to his presence, makes us ready to respond, to hear. If we love him, if we grieve for how he is abandoned and crucified by us and the world, if we long for that relationship with him that awakens us to real life, then there will be moments when we hear him call our names. We don’t come back to life, we don’t wake up to life by figuring things out or getting more knowledge about something or changing religions or churches or whatever. It’s about God in Jesus calling our name, speaking directly to our own hearts, bringing us back to life. The living Jesus awakens us to our own lives and

gifts and callings. Yes, the country, the society, the world, the church may be a mess, we ourselves may be a mess, but that's not important. Things will always be a mess in one way or another. But Jesus calls our names, invites us each to wake up to our own lives so that we live them fully in as those made and loved by God.

In her joy, Mary apparently rushed to embrace Jesus, for he says, "Do not hold on to me. Go and tell my brothers [by which he means the twelve disciples] that I am ascending to God." And Mary rushes off to do so. Here we pause to recognize that Jesus had many more disciples than just the inner circle of twelve. Yes, "the twelve" were male. But women were the first witnesses to the resurrection; all four gospels agree on that. These, too, were disciples.

Jesus doesn't let Mary hold on to him. We want to make Jesus a possession. A bumper sticker I've seen says, like the milk commercial: "Got Jesus?" Wrong! Nothing in Jesus' teachings or his life tells us we are to "get Jesus." He never talked about people owning him or possessing him. He didn't try to build a personality cult or a religious movement centered on himself. He was always pointing people to God and God's kingdom, not himself. All the pictures of Jesus in the gospels show him trying to wake us up to our relationship with God, being a kind of connector for us in that relationship. Jesus does not want us to hold on to him, but to follow him. It's a paradox: the only way we can hold on to Jesus is to let him go and to follow him!

It is dangerous when religions treat their spiritual founders as possessions and make icons out of them. It leads to arrogance and abandoning of the very truths those teachers taught. That leads to violence against those of other faiths and against those of your own faith tradition who don't believe the way you do. Don't hold on to me! Jesus is not a possession. A shepherd, yes. A comfort, yes. A teacher, yes. The one in whom we find our relationship with God, yes. All of those things. But not a possession we can hold on to. There is a remarkable, even shocking, Zen Buddhist saying: "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!" Don't turn the Buddha into a system of thought or a doctrine. Kill your ideas of the Buddha, your doctrines of the Buddha so the Buddha can live. I think it is the same with Jesus. Let go of Jesus, the living Christ. Let go of your dogmas about him. Let go of your tight hold on him out of your insecurities. Let go even of your ideas about him so that he can truly be the LIVING Christ. Certainly let go of Jesus as a weapon to strike fear into the hearts of others. Let go of him so that you can follow him. Jesus is going on to complete the mission of his life. And he calls us to follow him on the journey of making our own lives missions of God's love in the world and for the world.

I find in this loveliest of gospel stories two important things that speak to our spiritual lives as we work with them here in this community.

First is that our relationship with Jesus is to be one of love. Not legalism. Not intellectualism. Not even moralism. In John's gospel, what is emphasized is the relationship of love that needs to exist between us and Jesus and God, and consequently with one another. When we make our life of faith a matter of loving Jesus, then we will become sensitive to his presence so that there will be moments when we hear him call our names. This will bring us back to life and hope and faith. This is the work of what we call the inward journey. Our practice of silence, deeper self-understanding, and prayer help us see where we are being distracted and overwhelmed by things. When we practice calming our minds and hearts, we then come back to ourselves. It is there, in the solitude of our own inward journey, that we cultivate our love for Jesus, even if that love is filled with grief when he seems lost from us or stolen away. It is in solitude that we will be able to listen for and hear our name being called and our relationship with God in Jesus restored and revived.

The second thing is this: our loving of Jesus is expressed in our following him, the living Christ. It is a journey of faithfulness, what we call the outward journey of using our unique lives and gifts and callings in the service of life. Not a possession. Not holding on. But going on to where Jesus is leading us, to who he is and where he is calling us to be. The very last words of Jesus in John's gospel are the same words with which he began his ministry. And on this day of his resurrection, Jesus leaves us with these words: "Follow me."