

Each of our four canonical gospels tells the story of the Resurrection differently. The Gospel According to Mark, at least in its oldest form, barely tells it at all, ending abruptly with the women fleeing the tomb with no one having actually seen the Risen Christ. There's little agreement on who was at the Empty Tomb that morning, although all four gospels do mention Mary Magdalene. The Gospel According to John focuses most on Mary Magdalene and gives us the story of her encounter with Jesus which I just read. My sense of humor led me to make this passage our focus this morning. After all, Jesus' admonition to Mary, for centuries translated as "Don't touch me!" seems perfect for this COVID-19 era. But beyond a few easy jokes, which I hope you will forgive me on this still-joyous, still-cautious morning, there are some really good questions for us this morning as we think of Mary's "In the Garden" experience and I'd like to explore them with you.

First, a brief excursion into Church history. Once Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire by the Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313 and then made the official religion of the Empire by Theodosius in 380, Latin became the language of the Church in the West, that is to say Europe and Northern Africa and, later, in the Americas, as far as Catholics were concerned. Even after the Protestant Reformation, which promoted the use of the Bible in the native languages of the people, translations of the Bible were influenced, sometimes heavily, by Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation of the Scriptures from Greek and Hebrew in the late fourth century. Jerome translated Jesus' words to Mary as "noli me tangere" – "Don't touch me" – and generations of scholars followed suit.

The admonition seems remarkably topical. I've seen a number of posts and memes on Facebook in the last few weeks suggesting that people assemble playlists for the Coronavirus crisis. Some of my favorite suggestions have been remarkably similar to Jesus' words: "U Can't Touch This," by MC Hammer; "Don't Stand So Close to Me," by The Police; "Don't Come Around Here No More," by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. There are more, but you get the idea.

But is that what Jesus was really saying? Remember, Jesus spoke neither Latin nor, presumably, much Greek. Scholars of more recent vintage, with deeper knowledge of Greek than Jerome and with the honed ability to trace through the Greek what may have been the Aramaic originals of Jesus' sayings, have moved away from the derivatives of "noli me tangere" – "don't touch me." The Greek of the oldest manuscripts of John's Gospel is μη μου ἄπτου. The verb form in Greek refers to a continuous action, giving a more accurate translation into English as "don't hold on to me," "don't cling to me," or "don't attach yourself to me." It's much more likely that this is what Jesus was saying to Mary and I'll return to this idea in a minute.

But, of course, in my hurry to make my bad jokes and then explain them away, I've jumped to almost the end of the passage. I want to back up now and note a couple of other things about John's telling of this beloved story. It opens, in the first verse of chapter 20, in this way: "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." That second clause, "while it was still dark," functions on a couple of levels. Immediately, it conveys the urgency of the action of Mary and her as yet unmentioned companions. Although John doesn't mention them here, the other gospels tell us that a number of other women went with Mary to anoint Jesus' body. John obliquely reveals this when, in verse 2, Mary tells Peter and the Beloved Disciple, "we do not

know where they have laid him.” After the enforced inactivity of the Sabbath, Mary and the others were intent on fulfilling their last duty to their executed teacher. To them, part of a decent burial was for the corpse to be cleaned and anointed, rituals for which there was no time on Friday evening or, if John is correct and some of this had been done by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, from which the women who’d been among Jesus’ followers had been excluded. For Mary Magdalene and the rest, it was unthinkable that they should not go to the tomb at the earliest opportunity.

But, of course, this being John’s Gospel, we can also count on a symbolic use of light and dark, as we find throughout the book. In the opening paragraph, John writes about Jesus, the Word, “in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Nicodemus, the Pharisee seeker, comes to Jesus “by night” because he was looking for spiritual light. Now, with Jesus in the tomb, so far as Mary and the others know, “it was still dark.” Their fear, their grief, their confusion wrap around them so that life seems dark as night.

Some of this should seem very familiar to us. Is there anyone listening to me this morning, I wonder, who isn’t desperate to get back to life as usual? All of us long to be with our friends and family just as soon as we can. Our enforced inactivity, of course, isn’t the product of the Sabbath day but of the now weeks long effort to contain the virus. We understand Mary’s sense of urgency to do what she can for her dead friend down to our bones. And, as we’ve been told repeatedly by experts in mental health, we are all experiencing grief: grief over those who have died, grief over those who are in danger, grief over the loss of what we understand as normal life. Despite the promise of the light and life in Easter Sunday, we cannot deny that the darkness lingers around our lives just now.

Having gone to fetch Peter and the Beloved Disciple, Mary Magdalene has also returned to the gravesite. The men have retreated and, presumably, the other women as well. Now she is alone with her grief and, her duty of informing Jesus’ friends of what she believes to be yet more bad news completed, she gives in to that grief. It is easy to imagine her there, sobbing uncontrollably. She has lost so much. She has lost her healer. She has lost her Lord, her teacher to whom she was devoted. But now he has been taken away from her. He cannot heal her grief. She cannot follow him where he has gone, cannot support him in his tragically terminated ministry. She stood in mute witness to his dreadful death and now she cannot even tend his body in death. Perhaps her weeping leads her to crouch down. She looks in the tomb and sees something odd.

Two individuals dressed in white are sitting in the tomb, sitting where Jesus’ body had lain. “Woman,” they ask her, “why are you crying?” In her grief, Mary answers them, “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” But in her grief, Mary can make no sense of their presence nor of their question. In her grief, she does not recognize the one who now approaches and asks her again, “Woman, why are you crying? And who are you looking for?” This may seem preposterous to us. How can she not recognize the ones in the tomb as angels? Surely, she must realize that they did not enter while she was watching. How can she not recognize Jesus, whom she followed so faithfully? All sorts of convoluted answers have been proposed to these questions but I believe we need look no farther than her grief and

exhaustion for the truth. C. S. Lewis, in the days following the death of his wife, Joy, wrote, “No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid... At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says.” Surely, all of us can relate to Lewis’ description of grief, especially these days. If we are unable to comprehend the normal, expected murmurings of consolation as we grieve, how could we possibly expect poor shattered Mary to comprehend the incomprehensible? Remember, Mary did not go to the tomb that morning to wait for Jesus to rise. She went to perform her last duty to a friend whom she had seen cruelly tortured and killed before her very eyes.

But then, there was the moment of recognition. Not when he first spoke to her, echoing the question she’d already answered. Not when she first looked up at him with her tear dazzled eyes. But when he committed that intimate act of a friend, when he called her by her name. Surely it is as John recorded Jesus himself saying: “The shepherd of the sheep calls his own sheep by name and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” I can easily imagine Mary, in her overwhelming joy, simply throwing herself at Jesus, on her knees, clutching his legs, hugging him to reassure herself that he was alive.

That sense of relief has, thanks be to God, also become more familiar in recent days, at least for me. About a week ago, Connie’s youngest sister, Kate, let us know that her friend, Patty, was ill from coronavirus. When I first started dating Connie, Kate or Katie, as she was known then, was in kindergarten. Patty Morrow lived in the same parish and was the same age and the girls were absolutely inseparable. The two girls remained “besties” all through school. When Kate announced her decision to go to med school, Patty decided to go into nursing, so that she and Kate could work together. As it turned out, Kate’s life took her in a different way – she went into public health and a teaching and research position first at University of Kentucky and now at Indiana University. But Patty did become a nurse and that’s how she was exposed. When Kate let us know that Patty was gravely ill, we felt it with the depth normally reserved for danger to a family member. Patty really is just like one of the family. So when, a few days later, Patty messaged me to thank me for my “get well” message, I felt like I wanted to reach through the internet and give her a huge, long, tight hug. I felt in the presence of resurrection.

It is at moments like this that both Jesus’ divinity and his humanity overwhelm me. Only one with special access to God’s power could have come to life after that horrible death. This is not like Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised just a few days before. Lazarus needed someone to call him forth. Jesus needed no mediator between himself and the life-giving power of his Father. Lazarus staggered out of the tomb in his grave clothes, needing someone to unbind him from the linens that he would need again some day. Jesus simply shrugged off his wrappings, never to be bound by them again. Jesus is the first-born from the dead, the exalted one, the one with the name above all names. He is also Mary’s dear friend. Can’t you hear him gently speaking to her? “Woman, why are you crying? Don’t you know there’s no reason to cry? Who are you looking for? Don’t you see that it’s me?” His tender words to her remind me of my words to my wailing children when they were small and I was leaving them at day care or at home to go to work. “You need to stop holding on to me now. I’ve got somewhere to go.”

So, is that what Jesus meant when he said, “Don’t hold on to me?” Many of those who’ve wrestled with this passage, at least the ones that I’ve read, have decided that Jesus, also, had somewhere to go. Jesus tells Mary, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Then, a week later, as John tells us, he invites Thomas to investigate the wounds in his hands and side. Does this change in Jesus’ directions about his physical form mean that John understands the ascension to have happened during the intervening week rather than at the end of forty days of appearances, as Luke records? Why doesn’t Jesus want Mary to hold on to him? A professor and pastor whose online commentaries I often appreciate, Bruce Epperly, writes this: “Why not an act of love and connection from the loving teacher to a beloved friend? Is Jesus’ body somehow quantum in nature, lifted to higher frequency, and now too energetic for human touch? Is he not fully reconstituted? Or is there something more at work here, something theological in nature? Could it be that Jesus is saying to Mary – and to us – ‘don’t hold onto static images of me, don’t localize me in space or time, or confine me to a particular spiritual body or institution’?”

I know better than to suspect that those of you listening this morning would connect Jesus’ presence to a particular place or institution. Most of you came to Good Shepherd Baptist Church from other congregations or other denominations. Our Sanctuary may be special to you, the American Baptist heritage may be special to you, but you have felt the presence of Jesus in other sanctuaries belonging to other denominations. Many of us have felt Jesus’ presence in places of natural beauty, like Cascade Meadows or in state and national parks. The Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, can touch us at home. I know I’ve felt the Spirit moving in and around me in a theatre, and not just in those faith-based theatres I’ve served.

But are there ways in which we cling inappropriately to Jesus? What sort of mental constructs do we have about the Resurrected Christ? Do we expect him to be “like us” in ways more specific than our shared humanity? When we think of him, do we think of him as looking like those old Sunday School pictures of the man with long hair and fair skin? Do we expect that Jesus would, if he were physically among us, agree with all the ways that we worship God, with all of our philosophies and ethics? I thank God for being your pastor because it has encouraged me to keep reading the work of theologians and scholars who challenge my picture of Jesus, who make me say, “Wow, I’d never thought of that and I think it’s true!” I hope that, at least every now and then, your pastor’s preaching makes you reevaluate your own picture of Jesus. We must be careful what we hold on to.

Nor can we hold on to Jesus to own or to manage him. Jesus does not belong to us and to our understanding of him. His disciples had to learn that as well. They had to learn that the Gentiles were welcome in the Beloved Community. As the Good News moved out of the confines of the Roman Empire, Roman Christians had to learn that those they called “barbarians” were also welcome. We would live in quite a different nation had Euro-Americans taken seriously from the start their calling to welcome First Nations peoples and Africans as brothers and sisters in Christ. Some in the United States today refuse to welcome our Latino neighbors as we would welcome family or, in the past few months, our Asian sisters and brothers, blamed for the advent of coronavirus. In some churches, despite the witness of Mary Magdalene, the “apostle to the apostles,” a woman in the pulpit is still beyond the pale. When I think of respected clergy in our Evergreen Association such as Tim Phillips or Brian Henderson or Catherine Franssen, it’s

amazing to me that some Christians would still bar our differently gendered siblings from worship with us, let alone our pulpits. We must remember and remind others that Jesus died for all people.

And, we must remember and remind everyone that Jesus was resurrected for all people. Bruce Epperly writes, “At the very least, resurrection touches us all, providing a pathway from death to life for everyone, even those who are afar off as a result of doubt, behavior, or religious tradition.” And it is especially important that we remember and remind everyone that, as Scott Hoezee wrote this week in his commentary on this passage, resurrection “happens where death is, because that is the only place it is needed.”

My sisters and my brothers, we need resurrection this morning because death and grief are all around us. We need resurrection this morning because we feel that death’s power has us trapped. We live in the tension between Jesus’ resurrection, when he conquered death, and the realization of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God, when death, the last enemy, will be conquered forever. But for those of us who trust in what Jesus taught and did, who trust in our Loving Creator, who trust in the Spirit that carries out the work of Jesus and his Father today in us and around us, we who trust can sing with full hearts, “every morning is Easter morning from now on. Every day is Resurrection Day.” No matter what is in our past, that is over and gone. We need carry no guilt. We need not fear. Our lives are new and empowered because he is risen! Alleluia! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Thanks be to God. Amen.