

“Letting Go”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
March 23, 2008
Easter
Scripture: John 20:1-18

Well, here we are. Ready or not, it is Easter morning – the earliest Easter will ever be in our lifetimes. The tulips and hyacinths are spreading open. Reminders, we hope, that we may **someday** see flowers again outside. But the calendar says that it is Easter and we, the usual mix of the faithful, doubtful and skeptical are here. You come, expecting the preacher to say something, not too long hopefully, and not worth playing again and again on YouTube.¹

It has been a tough week for preachers. The Rev. Jeremiah Wright’s remarks have been circulated and analyzed and roundly condemned leaving Barack Obama to say “Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely – just as I’m sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed.” So we preachers know you will be listening all the more closely today – waiting to hear something with which you disagree!

Add to that the task of preaching on Easter – the “big one” some call it. You may think that we wait in anticipation all year to preach on this day, but the truth is we are not so sure we are up to the task. Words seem impossible to convey the story we remember that bears a truth we want to believe, God help us, that love is stronger than evil and life has triumphed over death.²

We wish we could just turn the service over to the trumpets and the organ and let the choir sing. But our task is to tell the story again with words appropriate for the day. And so the best thing to do is to go back to the story itself.

She did not expect today to be a good day. Anyone who thinks the truth about Easter is easy to grasp and pie in the sky never really listened to her experience.

Death, whether it comes expected after a long illness or shockingly sudden, death has a sting to it. Many, if not most, of us, have experienced death up close. One of the things we do as humans is to hold on tight to the memories of the one we love. So we gather pictures together and display them prominently. We tell stories and write them down so they will not be forgotten. We leave bedrooms unchanged – knowing that we are not yet ready to move on. It is a normal response to try and hold on to the things that remind us, keep us connected to the one who has died.

Death comes, and despite sealing the bodies in the grave and keeping the ashes on the mantle, we cling desperately to the life and love that was. Trying to hold on to the images of happier times, the sounds of voices, the way a favorite story was told, the memory of how his face felt, how her body moved. How they looked sitting on the porch at their cabin, or surrounded by pets.

Friends, trying to be helpful, suggest changing the voice mail. Friends, trying to be helpful, volunteer to take the clothes out of the closet and donate them to a worthy organization. Friends, trying to be helpful, suggest that her room would make a great home office. And we want to hold on. Don't you dare take away her voice. Don't you dare take away his clothes. Don't you dare change the bedroom into a study. Death stings. Death squeezes us like a vice, making it hard to breathe and eat and imagine a future. And so we hold on for dear life.

He had been her friend. She had had a checkered past. People looked at her, and would look away. "She has a demon," they would say, you know, she's not all there.³ She would sit down next to people at lunch, and they would find a reason to get up, and sit elsewhere. She had had a lonely life – until he had befriended her. To others, she was "that woman," but Jesus called her by name, Mary. His friendship, and the unlikely band of folks he gathered, gave her life meaning and purpose. Over time, he had helped her heal. Just when she thought it was beginning to make sense, the bottom fell out. Events seemed to speed up out of control. The wild entry into Jerusalem, with all the crowds and the shouting. An incident in the temple. The worried looks and obvious tension. And then he was captured. And, in the Roman style, made a public into a spectacle, crucified. Nailed up on a cross in a public place, a lesson not to disturb the peace. The others had deserted him, but she had remained with him to the end. When death came up on the cross, she had been there to witness it.

What could she do but visit the tomb? There had been so much that was not dignified in how he died. And so went to the tomb to pay her respects, to pretty it up. Her heart is broken, and she is trying to hold on to the pieces. She survives the night, lying awake, watching the minutes tick by. When enough of the night is gone, while it is still dark, she goes alone to the tomb.⁴ And when she gets there, she is shocked by what she sees. The stone that had been used to seal the tomb was gone.

What happened? Was it not enough that they had jailed him and killed him? Now his grave has been disturbed and the body missing. This is too much to bear, so she runs back and gets two other disciples. They can barely understand her between her anger and her grief and being out of breath and having had no sleep. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb," she sobs, and the three run back. And Mary stays weeping outside the tomb.

Anna Carter Florence describes what happens next.⁵

When you're crying over a stolen body, everyone you meet is a potential thief. That's where Mary is. Jesus appears right in front of her, and she can't even recognize him in the state she's in. She thinks he's the gardener, and that *he did it!* . . . "Sir," she begs him, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." She might as well have said, *Look, I won't press charges. Just show me the body, and we'll pretend it never happened.* I guess that's what you do when you're crying over a stolen body. . .

When you're crying about who took your Jesus away, I guess there's only one thing that will stop you. *Mary. MARY.* You have to hear him say your name. I don't know why, except that maybe we can't see resurrection any other way. And you *have* to see it; you have to *see* it, because it's not like you can *explain* it; if you could *explain* it, Jesus would have said, ". . . Sit down and let me interpret these events for you." You can't explain resurrection. It *addresses you*; it calls you out. *Mary!* That's all he had to say, and she knew. There isn't any guilty gardener; there isn't any stolen body. There's a *risen* body!

And what are the first words out of her mouth? A confession: *Rabbouni!*--which doesn't mean "teacher" at all, but, *my Lord. My Lord!*

Mitch Albom, who wrote that marvelous book Tuesday's With Morrie, has been exploring life after death in his recent books. He wrote a small book recently called For One More Day about a son who gets to spend one more day, with his mother who died eight years ago. She speaks first when they encounter each other again.

"Charley?" she said. "What's wrong?"

I did what you would have done [the character narrates].

I hugged my mother as if I'd never let her go.⁶

We can guess that that is what Mary tried to do when she recognized that his body had not been stolen – that it was Jesus standing beside her. Even if it was a dream, she did not want it to end. So she tried to hug him and never let go. That is what must have happened, because he literally says, "Stop holding onto me; stop clinging to me."⁷

Anyone who wonders, like me, wishes there were more details. Just "Do not hold on to me." But what really happened? We want to shout, like reporters at the end of a press conference. "Just one more question, Jesus!" But he has already walked off the scene.

From the very beginning, from Mary's encounter with Jesus outside the tomb, Easter has never been about the past, but about the future. She must have had so many more questions: Would she ever see him again? What really happened? What is it like to die? What would the others say? Would she be ridiculed, laughed at, alone again? But what else was there to do? So she went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord' (John 20:18).

Spring began on Thursday – officially. It snowed Friday and Saturday and again this morning. We don't know if we should wear Easter bonnets or woolen hats. As I said, Easter is early this year. And in many ways I still don't feel like I am ready. But on the other hand, Easter could not come soon enough.

There has been so much news lately that is bad. This week marked five full years of war in Iraq – already a full year longer than the United States fought in World War II. As of yesterday, almost four thousand US soldiers have been killed. And that does not count the wounded. More troops from Minnesota will be leaving soon. And what about the Iraqi casualties? "We don't keep an official count," we are told. But yesterday six Iraqis were killed when a U.S. helicopter fired on a small gathering at what may have been a pro-U.S. group's checkpoint, officials said.⁸ So much death, so much chaos, and no end in sight.

And we hear that the situation in Afghanistan is growing more dangerous, and the Taliban is regrouping. And Iran, we are told, poses a severe and dangerous threat.

The economy is an uncertain mess and people we know have seen their retirement accounts decline. People we know cannot sell their homes and people we know worry what will happen if they lose their job.

Someone you love goes to the hospital, and the doctor comes in to the room and simply says, "this is not good."

And so today cannot come soon enough, when we wake up to good news and trumpets and a whispered rumor of good news. That death does not have the final say. And so, like the two disciples who raced to the grave, we come ourselves to stoop in and peer at the tomb. And yet, even when they get there, there is nothing left to grasp. Only that Jesus is not there.

When you have experienced death, there is a temptation to hold on to a bit of your heart. You know now how much you can be hurt, so you hold on to a piece of your heart. And you love a little less. You hold on to a piece of your heart, and so you get a little less involved. You hold on to a piece of your heart, and so you hope for less and expect the worst. You save up your money, more than you would ever need for a rainy day, and become a little less generous.

The message of Easter, told first to Mary and then to us, is “do not hold on.” Let go, and learn to love again. Love fully again – holding nothing back. Do not hold on for a better moment, waiting for the time to be just right, before you act out the Easter promise. Do not hold on to the best part of yourself, keeping it in reserve. Let go, and love fully. Let go and care even more. Let go and embrace the unknown future. Give yourself, the best of yourself, today. Give yourself, the best of yourself, to those you love. Give yourself, the best of yourself, to those causes that are near to God’s heart and bring peace and justice and beauty into this world.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

¹ These two sentences were inspired by Agnes Norfleet, “Preaching the Easter Texts,” in Journal for Preachers, Volume XXXI, Number 3 Easter 2008, 22.

² This sentence is drawn from Jon Walton’s sermon “The Good News of an Idle Tale,” preached at First Presbyterian Church in New York City, 8 April, 2007, <http://www.fpcnyc.org/sermons/2007/pdfs/070408.pdf>

³ See Luke 8:2 “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out.”

⁴ In the other gospels, Mary Magdalene goes with other women on that first Easter morning, but in John’s telling of the story, she is alone. Mark 16:1 names “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome.” Matthew 28:1 has “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary.” Luke 24:1 says only that “they came to the tomb” (referring to “the women who had come with him from Galilee” in 23:55).

⁵ Anna Carter Florence, “Holding On (But Not to Jesus),” Sermon preached 5 November, 1999 at the annual conference of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians. Available on <http://www.covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/florence.html>.

⁶ Mitch Albom, For One More Day. I read an excerpt on his website, <http://www.foronemoreday.com/>

⁷ Anna Carter Florence

⁸ CNN, “6 Killed by U.S. Copter May Have Been Allies,” <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/03/22/iraq.main/index.html>