

Body or Spirit
John 20:11-18
April 1, 2018 – 8:00 AM – Easter Sunday

The twentieth chapter of John's Gospel is one of the most wonderful writings in the entire Bible. It is the traditional lectionary for Easter, every Easter; and personally, I have spent more time studying the twentieth chapter than any other chapter in the Bible. Indeed, the only academic work I have ever had published was on John, Chapter 20. But I have always said that the amazing thing about the Bible is that, no matter how much you read and study, there is always something new. So this Easter, as I reflected on the story of the empty tomb, I thought again of Mary.

Mary is standing outside the tomb crying. She looks in and sees two angels, two messengers from God; and they ask, "Why are you crying?" and she responds, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." Then she turns and sees Jesus, but does not recognize him. What's that about? Are her eyes so filled with tears that she can't see clearly? Is he so disfigured that he doesn't look like himself? Is she so filled with angst, that she cannot fathom that Jesus might be alive? We really don't know; but, she assumes he's the gardener.

Jesus says to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" And she replies, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." And then comes the moment of recognition. Jesus calls her by name: "Mary," and in the calling of her name, she recognizes him. I've preached on previous Easters about the power in a name, how Jesus calls us by name, and how we are called to follow. But it's the next verse that caught my attention this Easter.

Jesus replied, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God.'" This is one of those short verses that has caused academics to spill a lot of ink. What's this all about? Is Jesus somehow radioactive? Contaminated? Poisonous? No, I don't think so, at least not in a literal sense.

Some translations say, "Do not cling to me," and this is a very valid translation of the Greek. What's Jesus really saying – "Do not try to hold me here in an earthly physical presence. I must join in the spiritual presence of God." I must become a free spirit to fulfill my promise of not only eternal life but also eternal presence.

How often have I said, that one of the most important verses in the entire Bible is Jesus promise – the last verse of Matthew's Gospel: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."(Matt 28:20) Mary could not cling to

Jesus. Mary could not hold Jesus to an earthly presence. Jesus had to be free to be a living spiritual presence to each and every one of us at all times, in all places, even 2100 years after he first appeared to Mary.

Today, there are still those who want to cling to the earthly Jesus. I regularly find those who would put more importance in the earthly acts of the historical Jesus, 2100 years ago than in the very real presence of the risen Christ in our lives today. Now don't hear me saying that the earthly presence of Jesus was not important. It was hugely important, but it was most important as an expression of God's love for God's people. Friends, it's not important whether Jesus fed 4000 or 5000 people on a hillside, or how far offshore the boat was when Jesus came walking on water. Yes, as an academic, I sometimes enjoy wrestling with these things; but hear me: they are truly only important in that they are an expression of God's Amazing Love, and indeed Jesus is the personification of that love.

So Jesus said, "Don't cling to me. Rather go and tell my brothers, I am going to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God." Friends, that's the power, that's the glory, that's the Good News of the resurrection. Christ is alive; and Christ is with us, walking with us, caring for us, loving us, and leading us. That's the Good News of the resurrection. That's the Good News of Easter; and that love shared with each of us, that love of the risen Christ will truly never die.

Thanks be to God for the Good News of Easter. Amen.

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