

Easter Sermon – March 31 2024: Reuniciation and Vocation, Letting Go and Taking up

Christ is Risen! (He is Risen Indeed!)

Friends, today we celebrate a great mystery of faith – that Jesus, like a grain of wheat that had fallen to the ground and died, has nonetheless risen to new life – the first fruits of the new creation growing in our world and the pioneer of resurrection life for those who have fallen asleep in death. In the space of this Easter mystery, we have much to rejoice about. We rejoice, for we carry the promise that the sting of death that we feel throughout life’s journey does not have the last word. We rejoice that the powers of evil, of injustice, and of chaos have been defeated by Christ, even if they continue to make their stubborn, last-ditch efforts to undermine God’s plan to draw all creation into the fulness of God’s promise of life. The promise of life – of new life and new creation - has been celebrated by Jesus’ disciples ever since that first Easter day and we celebrate it today.

And yet, as we journey with Jesus beyond the tomb this morning, the first sounds we hear are not the sounds of rejoicing, but instead the sounds of weeping. And not just any weeping, but the weeping of a woman named Mary from a small town called Magdala. Jesus first met Mary during a time when she was beset by great affliction. He met her in that affliction and instead of turning away, he cared

for and healed her. After that, she followed him, until her journeys with Jesus led to the tragedy of his death. On that first Easter morning, Mary showed how much she loved Jesus by going to his tomb to tend to his body – to anoint it. But during this act of love, Mary had insult added to injury – it appeared that someone had taken his body; the body that had healed, had touched, had wept, had fed; *that* body had been, it seemed to her, taken away. In fact, in our passage for today, Mary repeats the suspicion that someone has taken Jesus’ body three different times: first to Peter and to the other disciple, then to the angels she sees in the tomb (whose appearance there don’t even seem to faze her, so focused is she on finding Jesus), and then she repeats her suspicion of grave robbery to Jesus himself, before she comes to dramatic recognition of him.

Someone had taken him, she was sure, just as he was taken when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, just as he was taken to the High Priest, to Pilate, and finally to the cross and tomb. Mary weeps because Jesus and all that he represented – God’s love, presence, compassion, power, justice, and mercy – had been taken. We can understand Mary’s grief – many of us have felt the sting of having loved ones taken from us, perhaps even suddenly. Even though few of us have had loved ones taken in the violent way that Jesus was taken, we too know what it is to weep deeply for those we’ve lost, whether recently or years ago. Not only that, like Mary, we know what it is to weep for other types of losses. In our

world now, we weep for the ways we see hate proliferate; we weep as we witness the ways human brutality wages war against the innocents of the world. When Mary says, “they have taken him,” can we not hear that Mary weeps for all of this too? They have taken his goodness. They have taken his love and compassion. They have taken it all away. Mary weeps and, looking away from who she *thought* was the gardener, she looks frantically to where they might have taken him.

But amid the weeping, Jesus speaks her name. “Mary.” It is a direct and personal address in a highly intimate setting. Jesus doesn’t go to the highest point of the city and proclaim himself saying, “Here I am!” Instead, he speaks a word of personal intimacy to someone he loves and who loves him deeply. Mary can feel his address in the depths of her soul. We know what this intimacy feels like – whether we are young or old in age, we know the love that comes from someone addressing us tenderly with our name. Can you hear Jesus speak your name, this morning? In your pain? In your despair? Can you hear it? In a flash of recognition, Mary turns to look at the one she loves, addressing him by the name so many knew him by: “Rabboni!” or “Teacher!”

John’s Gospel doesn’t spell it out here, but at this dramatic moment, Mary must wrap her arms around Jesus, squeezing so hard it’s like she’ll never let go. We don’t get a sense of time passing in this text, but I like to think that Mary and Jesus shared this embrace for a long while. She thought he had been taken, but here he

was: love, compassion, wisdom, and mercy – returned to her. Whatever else Mary might have thought or believed about resurrection, Jesus’ mysterious and confounding presence to her must immediately have felt like a surprising return of that which had been taken. But after some time and amid the joy of that return, Jesus speaks again. The personal, intimate address of “Mary” is replaced now by an unexpected imperative verb: “Do not hold on to me.” I wonder if these words were confusing, even hurtful at that moment, for Mary. “I had lost you and just got you back and now you want me to let you go?” Mary wants to hold on for dear life, as if to say, “No one can take you from me now.”

As Mary does this, can we not understand her impulse? When we face the threat of losing something or someone that is important to us, don’t we want to hold tight even more? Don’t we want to grasp on, to make them stay with us in the way we had them before? It’s a normal impulse – it means something or someone is important to us and has shaped us – has been a crucial part of our identity. Maybe we’ve had to face the threat of losing an important person or a relationship. Maybe we’ve had to face the loss of future dreams. Maybe we’ve had to face the loss of our health. In these situations, it is natural to want to hold on even tighter to whatever certainty we can grasp ahold of.

But, after some time we hear Jesus say, “Don’t hold on.” The gifts of God— gifts of relationships, dreams, health— are gifts given not as our possessions to

grasp onto and secure forever, but as precious seeds of God's love given to the world. Even the gifts of God's new creation given through the resurrection life of Jesus, are received new every morning not as we grasp on to what we have been given, but as we begin to release our grip on the gifts so that God can nurture them and make them fruitful in their time and for their season. "Do not hold on to me," Jesus says, and in saying this teaches again what he taught his disciples about the grain of wheat – unless you lose your life, like a grain of wheat that falls to the ground, you'll never gain it for eternal life – you'll never see the fruitfulness of new creation. With the imperative to "Not hold on," the resurrected Jesus teaches again that following him involves renunciation.

And yet, friends, on this Easter day it is crucially important that renunciation is not the only word Jesus speaks. In our passage for today, the risen Lord has yet another imperative verb for Mary. Had Jesus walked away after saying "Do not hold on to me," I could imagine Mary might yet have wept again. But before they part ways, he says, "Go!" Jesus does not leave Mary with renunciation alone. Rather, he sends her with a vocation. "Go...to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary is sent – she has a vocation of the utmost importance, to be the messenger of hope to the disciples, and then through the ministry of disciples, to the world. The message is that what the world tried to take away – God's goodness, love, compassion, and

righteousness incarnate in the life of Jesus—has not been taken away. Instead, it has been offered up to God and raised to new life by God’s power. Jesus tells Mary to tell the disciples “I am going to my God and your God.” God has conquered the death that takes away and has in turn *given* the gift of new creation. Because of this, we no longer need to let death control us by fear. “Go. Do not hold on...instead, go.” “Go,” be a messenger of good news to those around you. “Go,” embody the love of the risen Jesus in spaces of pain and sorrow. “Go.”

Friends, God does not ask us to let go without also granting us a vocation. No matter what age or stage of life we find ourselves in, we like Mary are asked, in the time we are given, to let go *so that* we can take up the task of the Gospel – *so that* we can proclaim in our words and our deeds the hope of resurrection life in Jesus, the seed of the world’s transformation. “Do not hold on to me....Rather, Go!” On this Easter day, when we celebrate that the fetters of sin and death have been broken by our Lord and Teacher, what do we need to let go of? Join me in holding your hands up and fists closed in a grasping position [pause]. Now hear the voice of Jesus say: “Do not hold on.” Now, slowly release your grip and listen.... hear Jesus say your name, and now hear him say: “Go, proclaim to the world in word and deed that God’s goodness, love, compassion, and righteousness has not been taken away. Go, young and old, Go and work and pray for God’s kingdom and righteousness to come on earth as in Heaven. Go!” Friends, let us be like Mary,

who went to the disciples with the Gospel – and let us turn to each other now and say: “I have seen the Lord!” AMEN.