

Letting Go
John 20:1-18
April 16, 2017
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John 20:1-18:

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. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look² into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew,³ 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, '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." 'Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

(Turn off lights. Put on headscarf, sadly walk around communion table, look up, shocked, and begin running throughout sanctuary, ending facing the congregation, and exclaiming, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him!" Fall down, weeping. Take off scarf, leaving it near flowered cross. Walk to pulpit. Turn on lights.)

So begins our gospel passage today. Mary Magdalene is traumatized from the events of Good Friday, of seeing her best friend tortured and killed, of waiting at the foot of the cross. She goes to the tomb early Sunday morning, when it is still dark, and sees the stone has been rolled away. She runs to the other disciples, to tell them what she has discovered.

I wish my two sons were here to act out the next part of the story. It is just delightful that the gospel writer includes this footrace that ensues. Peter and the beloved disciple (which some claim to be John), after hearing the news from Mary that Jesus is missing, take off to see for themselves. It is fascinating the description given of this: The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. One reason some scholars think “the other disciple” or “the beloved disciple” is John; because wouldn’t the writer of John want the readers to know he had arrived first, outrunning Peter?

My sons were, are and likely always will be competitive like this. When they were little, I remember at the swimming pool, they would race in the swim lanes. The younger one could never beat his older brother, so he figured out once the race started, he could hoist himself out, run alongside the edge of the pool, and jump back in the water at the end, claiming to have won the race. The gospel writer feels it necessary to include this competitive edge in the Easter story. It helps to make it real for us, to identify with the characters in the story as they are just like us.

There is a Greek word that perplexed me in seminary because it was so prominent in our studies, παρακύψας (*parakypsas*), which means stooped down to look. How often do we use that phrase in English, yet it came up so frequently on our Greek exams? Stoops down to look. Well, apparently the opening in the tombs back in the day was about 3 feet high, so one had to stoop down to look into the tomb. The beloved disciple, the one who arrives first, *parakypsas* stoops down to look into the tomb, and sees the linen wrappings, Jesus grave cloths, lying there and does not go in.

Then Peter runs up, *finally* (slow poke!), and bolts right into the tomb. He sees the linen wrappings and also the head wrapping neatly folded up off to the side on its own. The other disciple joins him, sees, and believes. We’re not sure exactly what it is that he believes, as the scripture says that neither of them understand yet that Jesus has risen. Perhaps he believes Mary, that Jesus’ body has indeed been taken. He’s not there. The two adolescent-acting racers then return to their homes, perhaps, no longer racing. Though they don’t understand, they must know something profound has happened.

Mary stays at the tomb weeping. She then *parekypsen*, stoops down to look, and sees two angels, maybe in the place where the grave clothes had been. They ask her why she is weeping. “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him,” she says again, as she had said to the disciples. Aren’t we like Mary, searching and grieving when we have lost something? When people die, and we want to know where they have gone? They are no longer in the body, so where are they? Or we’ve lost something meaningful, and we can’t seem to move on.

She then turns around, and sees what she thinks is the gardener, who also asks her why she is weeping and for whom she is looking. She answers, “Sir, if you have

carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” He says her name, “Mary,” and she recognizes his voice. It’s him, it’s Jesus! “Teacher!” she exclaims. “Do not hold on to me,” he says.

What an order. Do not hold on to me. How could she not? When we have found something that was missing, don’t we want to cling to it? When the void has been filled, don’t we want to hold onto that fullness for as long as possible? We’re not so good managing emptiness, we want to fill it, we want to fix it, we want to cling to it, or to the idea that we can.

Here at the church, we are in search of a new office administrator. It has been somewhat consuming me, the search. A slight preoccupation, shall we say. We are fortunate to have received many applications these past two weeks since the position was made available. With the Personnel Committee and session, we have been reviewing applications and scheduling interviews. I was speaking with one applicant earlier this week and asked her to come in for an interview on Thursday. “Isn’t that Maundy Thursday?” she asked. “Oh yes, I said, our service isn’t until the evening, so 2pm is fine.”

A mentor suggested I take Maundy Thursday off, to prepare and be present for Holy Week and the Triduum – Thursday, Friday, Saturday before Easter. Though I rescheduled that interview from Thursday to Monday, two more applicants came up in the meantime, and Thursday was again soon filled. I let go for a second, and then I grabbed back control. I couldn’t let go. I couldn’t accept the emptiness. I wanted to force a solution, and as quickly as possible.

The more we tightly clutch our problems, the less opportunity we give God to help us work them out. The more tensely and desperately we try to solve our predicaments, the more the answers elude us. Sometimes we feel God has abandoned us. We feel overwhelmed and anxious with various unexpected life situations: a diagnosis, a debt, an injury, a loss, a car accident, a death. Sometimes we are so confused that we are in no condition to make decisions. The more we struggle to work it out, the more difficult it becomes.

A way to comprehend and embody this idea of holding on, of clinging, is to physically hold on tightly to something, and to notice what happens. I turn my head away, I squeeze my eyes shut, I clench my teeth, my knuckles ache as my fists clench. Fingernails pierce my palms. I become exhausted and hurt. So why is it so hard to let go? Because we are trained to do it on our own, to be the best, the fastest, to get there first, to solve the problem, to not have to sit with the uncomfortable in-between.

My older son, Charlie, told me when we were mountain biking down a steep hill, “Whatever you do, make sure you let go of the brakes!!” It was the most counter-intuitive direction I had ever received. Apparently, when you are riding down a steep, dirt and rock path and you hold onto the brakes, you swerve and fall. I did let go of the brakes – I chose to just get off the bike and walk it down the hill.

Jesus tells Mary to let go. Stop clinging. If she is tightly holding on, she can't receive the help she needs to move forward. If she is tightly holding on, she can't see the miracle right in front of her. Let go. Be open to what God is giving in this moment. Step back. See the miracle. Go share it.

When we let go, we find unexpected reserves of energy. We have to be willing to let God help. God's help is always available; all we have to do is to make room for God to take part in our lives and keep ourselves ready and willing to accept God's guidance. Solutions begin to unfold that we never dreamed possible. (example here) Our eyes are open to see fresh opportunities, many of which may have been there all along. Our human understanding has limits – there are things we can't figure out by ourselves. When we let go and trust God, we will see things happen that we ourselves did not bring to pass.

The Lenten reflections this season from members highlighted the ways that each person let God into his or her life; each one was a story of letting go. Thank you to these friends who shared their stories with us this past Lenten season – Jim, Bonnie, Helen, Ginger and Tani. Thank you for letting God in and sharing your experience of new life with us.

St. Francis de Sales says, ““God does not deprive us of love; we deprive God of our cooperation. “ When we are holding on tightly, we are not cooperating with God. We are not allowing God a chance to help us out. We have to let go, and make room for God to do what God does, which is to make life new.

Jesus didn't hold on to anything, even life itself. Jesus let go, entrusting himself to God every step of the way. Jesus let go, and allowed God to do what God does – to make life new.

Jesus says to Mary, “Do not hold on to me, Go.” It is in this moment, that Mary understands. She meets God in the moment she is able to let go. She hears his voice and recognizes him. This is what gives her clarity and purpose.

Mary runs to her trusted friends at the beginning of the passage when she finds the tomb empty and she goes to them at the end of the passage as Jesus tells her after he reveals himself. That is what we are to do. We are not meant to go it alone – not to grieve alone and not to celebrate alone. Ideally, the church provides a place for grieving, healing, celebrating in community. To remember that God is with us and always will be.

Resurrection faith is leaving behind and letting go of the things that hold us captive, the things to which we cling and of which we are afraid to let go. What is it you are clinging to today? What is holding you captive, and can you make a decision to let go, and see what God can do with your struggle?

A few years ago, I attended a conference at the seminary from where I had graduated. There I saw my former professor, Dr. Eugene Park, one of the most reverent people I have ever met. He asked how I was doing and I told him, honestly, that I was heartbroken and grieving and not doing very well. I explained that I had dropped off my oldest son at college, and that it was the hardest thing I had ever done. That it felt so unnatural to spend nearly every day of his 18 years with him and then hug him good-bye and walk away, walk to the car and drive away, leaving him there.

My eyes were filled with tears, and I looked up, and Dr. Park's eyes were also filled with sorrow. He shared with me the experience of the recent death of his mother, who lived a long and fruitful life, and how painful it was for him. He said this: "Stephanie, I am starting to think that life is a series of letting go of what we love the most. And when we have finally let go of every last thing of which we hold dear, then perhaps, we will see the face of God."

The good news today is that God provides the miracle. All we have to do is trust, and let go. Let us now behold the words of the first Christian preacher, the first to share the good news, the first preacher, who also was a woman preacher, Mary Magdalene.

(Put on scarf, face the congregation, and exclaim, "I have seen the Lord!" Turn towards the cross lifting up hands and saying, "Alleluia! Amen!")