

DON'T TRY TO HOLD ON
The Fourth Sunday of Easter

(04/21/2024)

Scripture Lesson: John 20:1-18

“Jesus said to her [Mary Magdalene], “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:17)

“The dead are invisible to us. They are not absent.” (Augustine of Hippo)

Today is the fourth Sunday of the Easter season. The Easter season is a time when we reflect on those passages of scripture that describe the disciples' experience of the risen Christ. We read these passages not only as history, as descriptions of what the disciples experienced during the forty-day period between Christ's resurrection and his ascension into heaven, but as guidelines for our own spiritual journey. We hope that, like the disciples, we will be able to discover or rediscover the risen Christ in our lives.

This morning, we listened to Mary Magdalene's experience of the risen Christ by the tomb on Easter morning as recorded in the Gospel of John. Mary comes to the tomb to anoint her Lord's body, to prepare it for burial. When she arrives, she finds the stone covering the opening to the tomb has been removed. She runs to tell Peter and John that the tomb is empty.

Peter and John run to the tomb. They find the linen wrappings in place, but the cloth that had been on Jesus' head is rolled up in a place by itself. Neither they nor Mary grasp the full implication of the empty tomb. Scripture says, “for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” The disciples return to their homes.

Mary remains by the tomb, weeping. As she weeps, she bends over to look into the tomb. There she sees, for the first time, two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. The angels ask her why she is weeping. It is remarkable that Mary, overwhelmed by grief and confusion, is able to carry on a conversation with the angels. She tells them that someone has taken away her Lord and she does not know where they have laid him.

The angels do not respond to Mary's inquiry concerning the location of Jesus' body. Perhaps what happened to the body is not important, is not the deeper meaning of the resurrection. Perhaps they see what Mary has not yet seen. (Angels can do that, you know!) Mary turns around and sees someone standing near her. She does not know that the person standing before her is Jesus.

Jesus asks her why she is weeping. He asks her whom she seeks. This is a beautiful question, a powerful question: “Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the caretaker of the cemetery, Mary asks him if he knows where her Lord's body has been taken. At this point, Jesus

calls her name. Suddenly Mary's eyes are opened! She recognizes him as her Lord! This parallels the disciples' experience in Emmaus. When Jesus breaks bread with them, as he did at the Last Supper, "their eyes are opened, and they recognize him."

As soon as the disciples in Emmaus recognize him, Jesus "vanishes from their sight." With Mary, the conversation following the recognition is more extensive. When Mary reaches out to touch Jesus, he tells her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which we use, translates Jesus' words to Mary as "Do not hold on to me." In the Revised Standard Version, Jesus says, "Do not hold me." In the Jerusalem Bible, a translation by Roman Catholic scholars, Jesus says, "Do not cling to me," while the King James Version translates this passage as "Touch me not."

Why would Jesus ask Mary not to touch him? What would have happened if she touched him? Would something happen to him? Would something happen to her? Was Jesus already in a different or altered form? Had he already become more spirit than matter? But if this were so, why, only one week later, does he invite Thomas to touch the wounds in his hands and his side?

I believe that the Revised Standard Version's translation "Do not hold me" is closer to the meaning of this passage than "Do not touch me." I believe that the Jerusalem Bible's translation, "Do not cling to me," is even closer to what Jesus is trying to say. Jesus is telling Mary that she has to let go of him in order to rediscover him in a new and different way.

You see, Mary and the other disciples knew the human Jesus of Nazareth. They traveled with him. They heard his words and witnessed his healing miracles. They broke bread with him every day for the past three years. They had a personal relationship with him, a relationship that changed their lives.

Now this man is dead. He is no longer with them. Mary and the disciples are grieving. They miss the Jesus whom they knew. If they had their way, they would wish him back to earth. They do not yet understand the deeper meaning of his death and resurrection, his promise that after his death he would return to them in a new and different form.

Only a few days before his death, Jesus tells his disciples that he will be leaving them. He says,

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. (John 14:18-20)

Jesus breaks down the distance many of us have created between earth and heaven, between us and God. As we have explored in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group on Meister Eckhart and in our discussion of the mystical root of Christianity, if Jesus is in God, if we are in Jesus, and if Jesus is in us, then there is no distance between us and God! Each and every one of us is an incarnation of God's creative spirit!

From what Jesus tells his disciples, it is clear that his death is not a tragedy; it is a necessary part of a transformation from matter to spirit that will ultimately benefit the disciples, and which is of immeasurable benefit to us!

These passages of scripture remind me of two Buddhist teachings. The first is a strange teaching. It tells us, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him."

When I first encountered this teaching, which I later learned is attributed to the Buddhist Master Lin-Chi (died 866 C.E.), I thought that it might have been said by someone who doesn't like Buddhists. But most people like Buddhists. I mean, what's not to like? Buddhists are nice people! They are nonviolent—although I am not thrilled with what they are doing to the Muslims in Myanmar. Buddhists don't even like to kill and eat little animals. In addition, this is purportedly a Buddhist saying. So why would a Buddhist tell us that if we met the Buddha on the road, we should kill him? And what does this have to do with the death of Jesus?

This Buddhist teaching addresses a human tendency that Jesus also addresses with his disciples. If Jesus were to appear on earth right now in human form, and if we were convinced it was Jesus, we, like the disciples would probably follow him. At least I hope we would follow him! We would listen to his teachings. We would write down everything he said, thus sparing us from the never-ending debates of biblical scholars concerning the authenticity of various texts. We would become his followers. We might even worship him.

So, what is the problem with this? From one perspective, there is nothing wrong with it. We would become disciples of Jesus just like the original twelve. From another perspective, however, there is a danger to this kind of discipleship. Jesus tries to make his disciples aware of this danger when he tells them that if they focus all of their attention on him, they will miss the deeper truth, the deeper revelation of that which he incarnated. By focusing all our attention on the outer human Jesus, we might never discover the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. We might never discover the spark of divinity within!

The Buddha tells us that we can not become enlightened by believing in him, nor can one find enlightenment by becoming a disciple of him or anyone else. True enlightenment is the discovery, the experience of our own Buddha-nature, the spark of divinity within us, that which was with us all along, even when we were living in the darkness of ignorance. He tells us that it

is more important that we find the spark of divinity within ourselves than that we witness it in him. In fact, our worship of him, our veneration of him could actually become a distraction. By locating divinity outside us, we remain blind to our own divinity.

From the passages we heard this morning from the Gospel of John, I think Jesus would agree with the Buddha.

The second Buddhist teaching that might help us understand what Jesus said to Mary by the tomb is the teaching about attachment. In the exchange that is the focus of our reflections this morning, Jesus tells Mary not to become attached to him in human form, to his earthly body. If she were to hold onto this, if she were to cling to this, she would only cause suffering for herself. She would miss the opportunity to rediscover him in a new and different form.

Buddhism tells us that suffering arises as a result of our attachments, our grasping. In order to eliminate suffering in our lives and in the world, we need to identify that to which we are attached, that which we seek to control, and learn to let this go. I believe this is one of the central themes of Jesus' life and teaching. As we reflect on the way that Mary and the disciples had to give up what they had to discover something greater, we will hopefully be able to identify and let go of that which is holding us back from the discovery of the risen Christ within us and in our daily lives.

The central dynamic underlying our grasping is self-centeredness. Self-centeredness is the root of our suffering and the suffering we inflict upon others. Jesus tells us that our self-centeredness needs to be replaced by Christ-centeredness, by God-centeredness. The apostle Paul tells us that we need to die to the old self to be reborn, to enter the new life which is offered to us by Christ and in Christ. We need to let go of our attachment to ourselves!

For those of us who have lost loved ones, and several of us here this morning have lost loved ones, this is an important teaching. When people we love are alive and in human form, we want to be near to them; we want to be with them; we want to hold them. We want to keep them with us forever. When they die, we feel as if we have lost them.

To some extent, this is true. We have lost them in one form, in their human form. But this form, the human form, could no longer hold them. If they stayed in human form, it would cause them great suffering. They had to be released from this form to return to God and also to be with us in a new and different way. When we center our thoughts on our loss of them as we experienced them in human form, we may miss the rediscovery of them in our lives today.

I often feel a touch of sadness on Wednesday afternoons and Sunday evenings. For several years prior to my mother's death, I visited her twice a week in the nursing home in

Swampscott. On Wednesdays I fed her lunch, and on Sundays I fed her supper. I not only miss my mother; I miss being able to feed her, to do something for her. I will never again be able to visit her, to feed her, to take her out for a ride. However, if I had the power to extend her life, to hold onto her, it would have caused her suffering. I needed to let her go so I can discover her in a new way. In this new way, in this new form, there is no separation.

Jesus tells Mary and the disciples to let go of him even as he appeared as the risen Christ, that he might reunite with the Father. He tells us to let go of our attachments to our possessions, our attachments to our loved ones, our attachment to ourselves, our attachments to our beliefs, even our attachment to him! Like the Buddha, Jesus tells us that grasping, whether it is the grasping of possessions or the grasping of special people, only produces suffering.

Jesus tells us that when we cannot let go of the human form of someone we love, we will find it difficult to rediscover that person within us. We will feel empty and lost, just as the disciples felt empty and lost following his death. Jesus tells us that faith can lead to a magnificent discovery! This is what the apostle Paul is telling us when he says that we Christians should not grieve as those do who have no faith. As Augustine, the 3rd century bishop of Hippo said, “The dead are invisible to us; they are not absent.”

“Do not cling to me.” This directive to Mary Magdalene is a profound teaching in relation to her experience of the human Jesus. It is also a profound teaching in relation to her experience of the risen Christ in the form he assumed by the tomb. It opens her to the experience of the Holy Spirit within her. She may have been separated from the human Jesus and from the man with whom she conversed by the tomb. But she can never be separated from the Holy Spirit, the presence of God within her, a presence that is both shaped and mediated by her relationship with Jesus the Christ!

We never met the human Jesus of Nazareth. We were not privileged to walk with him, to listen to his teaching, to break bread with him. We were not afforded the experiences of the risen Christ that Mary, the two disciples in Emmaus, the disciples in the Upper Room, and the disciples by the side of the lake had of Jesus following his resurrection. But this is not as great a loss as it might seem! It is not an insurmountable obstacle to our relationship with him. When we experience the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us, we find that we reconnect with the human historical Jesus. We also realize that we can never be separated from him, that he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves.

Like Mary and the disciples, we need to remember that what is true of our relationship with Jesus is also true of our relationship with our loved ones. We cannot hold onto them. If we can let them go, we might experience them in a new and different way in this life, and we might experience them in a new and different way after their death. When this happens, we will no

longer believe; we will actually *know* that love is stronger than death, and that nothing can ever separate us from those whom we love!

As Saint Augustine has said, “The dead are invisible to us; they are not absent.”

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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(An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.)