

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
Easter Sunday, 3/24/08

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

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. [2] 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." [3] Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. [4] The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. [5] He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. [6] Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, [7] and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. [8] Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; [9] for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. [10] Then the disciples returned to their homes.

[11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; [12] 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. [13] 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." [14] When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. [15] Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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." [16] Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). [17] 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.'" [18] 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.

HOUSE HUNTERS

Two years ago about this time of the year I was going through the process of moving to St. Cloud. We must have looked at fifty houses trying to find the one that fit our exact specifications.

Perhaps the reason we had to look at so many homes was because Carrollyn and I had different priorities. Carrollyn was interested in things like the design of the kitchen, the size of the master bedroom, and the number of bathrooms.

I on the other hand wanted to make sure that the yard was small (because I would have to cut it), the garage was large (because it would have to hold my woodworking equipment), and above all, there had to be a large storage space above that all important garage. Now you might rightly ask why I was so adamant about a storage space.

Friends, I am holding on to a lot of stuff, and I keep that stuff for a reason. The stuff in my attic is a treasure trove of memories.

I have the cradle that I assembled and finished when my first child was born. I have Legos that my son played with as a child. I have ballet costumes. I have Christmas ornaments from three generations. I have golf clubs that I no longer use but remind of the loved one who gave them to me long ago.

I know that we should get rid of some of that stuff, but every time we talk about it my wife gets teary-eyed, I get sentimental and we both give in to our feelings. We just hang on to everything and buy a house with a bigger garage and attic.

HOLDING ON

I know none of you have done anything this crazy, but I bet in your own way, you too hang on to things that remind you of a past that has passed you by. It's not all bad. It's important to have a sense of personal history. In many ways hanging on to things is way of honoring and embracing our past.

Another way that many of us do that is pay a visit to the cemetery. We bring fresh flowers and think wistfully about our loved one who has died. At its best these visits are a way of paying our respects and remembering the contribution that person made to our life.

These visits can be very sobering but also very beneficial. For example, I think everyone should pause at Arlington National Cemetery and think about the sacrifices made by so many on behalf of our country. Unless we honor the memory and contributions of those who have preceded us in death our lives are very shallow and unreflective.

But, we also know that hanging on to the memory of loved ones can be a bad thing, a destructive thing. Every time I pass by one of those roadside memorials that mark the death of someone in an automobile accident, I can't help but think about the people who maintain and come to that memorial.

There are often fresh flowers placed on these roadside memorials on a regular basis for many years. Hanging on to the past is important to these people. It has to be a terrible memory, but it is apparently one that these people are willing to keep alive. Indeed, they seem to feel that they must keep it alive.

But, surely this can't be helpful. Surely all they're really doing is not allowing a wound to heal. But, of course grief is certainly not a logical experience. Sometimes it causes us to hang on to the strangest things.

Most of us know what it is to like to make that first lonely visit to the grave site after a loved one is buried. There is no one around, and in our grief the tears fill our eyes to the point we can't see.

We're trying to hold on, to hang in there but at times it seems like there is no one can really understand what we are going through. We are living out the mournful words of the old spiritual, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

MARY'S AND THE TOMB

That's where today's story begins. It begins with a woman named Mary who is hanging in there, who is holding on but just barely. The Bible tells us that it was still dark when she arrived at the tomb. That's appropriate because this has been a dark time for everyone. They had such high hopes for the ministry of Jesus. Some even thought that he might be the Messiah, but now all that was over.

So, in the dark she comes to the tomb. She comes to the place where they have laid the body of Jesus to pay her last respects. She has come to cry and mourn. She has come to hold on to her memory of Jesus and bitterly rehearse the hopes that have been dashed by his arrest and crucifixion.

Maybe she wanted to make sure that all was right with the tomb — much like we go back afterwards to make the grave marker is in place and all is well.

But, Mary finds that all is not well.

The tomb has been disturbed.

The heavy stone has been removed from the tomb.

GRAVE ROBBERS!

Now what does Mary think when she sees that the stone has been removed? Does she think that Jesus has risen from the dead as he said? Not at all. She thinks that someone has stolen the body.

She turns on her heels and runs as fast as she can to tell the disciples what she assumes to be the truth, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

The disciples, Peter and John respond by running to the tomb. John is younger and faster. He makes it to the tomb first, peeks in the opening and sees the grave clothes.

Peter is older and slower but not nearly as cautious. Huffing and puffing the impetuous Peter enters the tomb and confirms what John saw from afar. It is a tomb filled with

grave clothes and no body. Strangely the linen cloth that had been on Jesus's head was rolled up and put in a place by itself.

The folks at Bible study compared this to the raising of Lazarus. Lazarus you'll remember was bound up in his grave clothes and needed the help of others to get out of them after Jesus called him from the grave. But, in this case the grave clothes are still in the tomb, laid neatly aside. This was not a rushed attempt to steal a body. This is something quite different. It's the first indication that there is more to this than meets the eye.

But, Peter and John don't see it that way. They see the empty tomb and believe. Don't misunderstand. They don't believe in a resurrection. They believe that Mary was right. Someone has stolen the body. And so the disciples go home.

There are some who say that the resurrection of Jesus is a myth, that his disciples invented the story as a form of wish fulfillment and keeping the spirit of Jesus's ministry alive. That theory certainly doesn't fit with the story as we have it.

When Mary sees that the stone is rolled away her first thought is that someone has stolen the body.

And when Peter and John come running and find an empty tomb filled with grave clothes, they think the same thing.

There's nothing to be gained by staying at the tomb as far as they're concerned. They just believe Mary and go home.

MARY AND THE RISEN CHRIST

But, Mary stays. Mary stays to weep bitter tears at the place where her loved one was last seen. I have often wondered why Mary insisted on looking inside the tomb again. Perhaps she just couldn't believe that something so horrible had happened.

She looked inside the tomb, and this time the tomb is not empty. Two angels dressed in white are in the place where Jesus's body once lay. And the angels ask her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" And she replies, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Again she hears the question, but this time it comes from behind her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

This time the one who asks the question is the risen Christ. But, Mary does not recognize him. The reason is simple. Mary is looking for a dead man; Mary is looking for a body that has been stolen. And her expectations prevent her from seeing the fact that angels surround her and indeed even Jesus is right there with her.

GOOD GRIEF

I wonder. Are angels surrounding us right now? Is the Spirit of Christ right here with us? We sometimes cannot perceive God's presence because we are holding on too tightly to the past. We live in a world of sorrow and regret.

Jesus comes to us with a future that is always filled with hope — not only for this life but also for the life to come.

This story of the resurrection is a story about how our false expectations can limit our ability to see the possibilities in our life. We say that we believe in the hope of life eternal, but when we are confronted with the reality of death, we often just hang on to the memories — as if that is all we have.

Memories are great. It is good to remember and give thanks. It is good to grieve when we lose our loved ones. That's good grief.

But, that grief needs to be put in the context of the resurrection. At every funeral I read a passage from Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica. Many of their church members had died, and they were beginning to lose hope.

I know what that's like. Sometimes a church has a bad year. Many members die, and a spirit of fear pervades the congregation. One woman told me that when the phone rang she was didn't want to answer it for fear that it would once again be bad news.

That's what happened at the church in Thessalonica. They were filled with sorrow and foreboding. They wondered if they had done something wrong to deserve such tragedy. They even wondered if those who had died would somehow miss out on the joys of heaven.

Paul told this struggling congregation, "Don't grieve as those who have no hope. The story of the resurrection is not just about Jesus. It's about you. Just as Jesus died and rose again so one day God will raise those loved ones that you mourn today. God will be with you and care for you. He is with you now, and He will be with you when that final trumpet sounds."

(See I Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Paul's message of comfort is just as relevant today as it was then. And Jesus asks us as he asked Mary long ago, "Why are you crying? Why are you gripping the past so tightly? Why are you looking for hope in all the wrong places? Hope is not found in the tomb. Hope is not found in the graveyard of faded memories.

HE CALLS OUR NAME

Hope is found outside the tomb. Hope is found in the Spirit of the risen Lord who comes up behind us and calls us by name. That's what Jesus did for Mary. He called her name, and it was then that she recognized him.

This past week my mother told me about something that happened to her after my father died. I asked her permission to tell this story because it is in many ways a very personal and private story, but it illustrates what it means to hear the Lord call our name.

Mom, like Mary had been spending a lot of time at the cemetery after my father died. At first she said that she felt close to dad at his final resting place.

But, over time despite her best efforts to keep his memory fresh in her mind, she knew that he really wasn't there. One day she visited the grave and began to cry uncontrollably. She noticed some drops of blood on the granite marker. She had a nose bleed but her sorrow was so great that she hadn't paid any attention.

And at that moment she decided, "I just can't keep doing this. I have to let go. I have to quit holding on to the past. Jack is with the Lord, and I have more to do."

Mom said that from that time forward she didn't feel the need to visit the cemetery. Her hope had moved beyond the tomb to a different place.

That's what happens when Jesus calls our name. He calls us to move beyond the tomb.

DON'T HOLD ON

The Bible tells us that Jesus called Mary's name, she recognized him and then she held on to him for dear life. And Jesus tells her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father."

I wonder if this meant that Mary was still trying to hold on to the old Jesus. She wanted Jesus with her in the way that he was before. She wanted to restart her life as if the cross was just a bad dream.

But, that wasn't possible. The cross was not a bad dream. The Jesus who shows himself to Mary outside the tomb will soon show himself to disciples in the upper room. This Jesus will be no ghostly apparition but a risen Lord who has nail-scarred hands and a wounded side. After the cross and the resurrection Mary's relationship with Jesus will never be the same. But, more than that, Mary's life will never be the same either.

Mary has not been called to hold on to a Jesus who remains entombed in the past. Mary is called to go on and tell others what has happened.

The risen Jesus is going to be with his heavenly Father. And this is not a disadvantage. It is a promise. The Bible tells us that the Ascension of Christ makes His presence available to us all. Jesus told his disciples that he would not leave them as orphans. He

would send them his Spirit, a Counselor who would not only comfort them but also equip them to tell others the good news.

This is what happened to Mary. In the presence of the risen Christ she was able to let go and go. She no longer held on to Jesus. She was going on to tell others the good news.

OUR DESTINATION IS SURE

I wonder. What would it take for us to quit holding on to fading memories and worn out dreams? What would it take for us to move on boldly and confidently? Maybe it would help if we realized that although the journey is uncertain our destination is sure.

More than 200 years ago in Vermont a man named John Todd was born. His family soon moved to the small community of Killingsworth, Connecticut. Tragedy struck early in young John's family. Before he was six years old both of John's parents died.

John and his brothers and sisters were sent to various relatives to be raised. John was assigned to an Aunt who lived about ten miles away from his home. She was both father and mother to this little boy and saw him all the way through college and into his chosen profession.

Years later she was taken seriously ill and knew that she was close to death. She was afraid, and in her anxiety she wrote a letter to John who had been more like a son to her than a nephew. John wrote this letter of encouragement,

□It has been nearly thirty five years since I, a little boy of six was left quite alone in the world. I have never forgotten the day when I made the long journey to your home. I still recall the disappointment when instead of coming for me yourself you sent your hired man Caesar to fetch me.

And I still remember my tears and anxiety as I perched on your horse and clinging tightly to Caesar I started out for my new home. As we rode along I became more and more afraid. Finally I said anxiously to Caesar, □Do you think she will go to bed before we get there?□ □Oh no,□ he answered, □she'll be sure to stay up for you. When we get out of these woods, you will see her candle shining in the window□

Presently we did ride out into a clearing, and there, sure enough, was your candle. I remember that you were waiting at the door, that you put your arms around me, and that you lifted me down from the horse. There was a fire on your hearth and a warm supper on your stove. After supper you took me to bed, heard my prayers, and then sat beside me until I dropped asleep.

You undoubtedly realize why I am recalling all these things. Some day soon God may send for you to take you to a new home. Don't fear the summons, the strange journey, or the dark messenger of death. At the end of the road you will find love and a welcome;

you will be safe, there as here in God's love and care. Surely he can be trusted to be as kind to you as you were to me years ago.

Some of us are like Mary today. The future looks pretty bleak. We sit outside the tomb filled with grief.

But, I believe the risen Christ still speaks to us. He calls us by name and assures us of a new home just beyond the horizon. What was it Jesus told his disciples? "In my Father's house are many mansions." Our Lord always prepares a place for us, in this life and in the life to come.

So, my friends let us quit holding on to a past of tears and pain. And let us go on to tell others the good news. We have seen the risen Lord. He stands behind us now, and he waits for us at the end of the journey.

Amen.