

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 look 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, '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.

## Easter Sunday: Holding on; Holding forward

We hear the Easter story every year and yet each Gospels account offers a wrinkle or two. Take, for example, that Mary comes to the tomb in the dark. John has a fascination with setting scenes in the dark—it is the author’s way of clarifying that some of the characters do not yet have the sight lines to perceive what has been happening. In John’s gospel so much Jesus action happens in the dark.<sup>1</sup> In the night, in the dark, in our fears-- Jesus tends to appear.

Consider the characters who show up to the tomb in the shadows of Easter morning. They are grieving. They are expecting dead Jesus. Dead Jesus is missing. Mary is troubled; her response was a return the disciples to report her belief that “they” (whoever they are) have taken the body Jesus. Two male disciples make their way into the tomb to confirm such a report. Confirmed, no dead Jesus. There are linens there, however, but they can not come up with possible options for the sheets. And somehow they miss the two angels who are seated inside the tomb. How do you miss angelic figures?; subdued lighting as it must have been? Unless your mind is clouded. For her part, Mary recognizes the two messengers but is so overcome with grief that she can not compute that these angels might be bringing good tidings. She turns around and sees the risen Christ, but she does not recognize him. And here I will pause for a brief reflection on what is apparent in the text and far too common in our world.

Grief and fear affect the manner in which we perceive new realities. Resurrection, we might say on Easter Sunday. Peter, the disciple Jesus loved, and Mary Magdalene all appear at the tomb on account of their deep connection with Jesus. All three confuse events on the ground because they are not able to sense the new reality unfolding before them. I would like to think we 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians are no different, but likely not. This beautiful story of John 20 asks us to consider those places in which our grief and fear might be hindering our imaginations to see the new life emanating from the tomb.

We have lost loved ones and the grief of their absence affects some more than others. This grief keeps us from seeing that their suffering is over, that they are in the hands of God, and that our personal space for compassion has been increased. Another example: aging effects stamina and memory and the resilience of our bodies and we grieve that; and that keeps us from recognizing that with each year lived has offered. Susanne is gone, and her pastoral presence among us is

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<sup>1</sup> Nicodemus approached Jesus in the night (3:2). Jesus crosses the sea with no recognition in quasi night (6:17). At the prediction of Judas’ betray in John’s gospel (13:30), the text says “it was night”. In the garden, soldiers with lanterns (18:3) approach Jesus in the night; Peter in the dark in the courtyard (18:18) denies that he knows Jesus. The body of Jesus is removed as the day’s light faded (19:42). The disciples catch no fish by night but catch abundantly in the dawn (John 21).

missed; and that keeps us from noting that her absence has created space for greater congregational involvement in our church. We grieve that children grow up or children move away or children sometimes take an ambivalent interest in church; and that keeps us from seeing that they have left the sealed tomb of the home and that the Good Shepherd who has left the tomb is out there looking for his sheep.

I don't mean to sound dour on Easter morning, but an honest reflection on our scriptural text of day, demands an honest account of the griefs we carry which are present on this Easter morning. These observations mesh quite well with another intriguing aspect of John's Easter passage.

Have you ever mistaken the Christ because you suppose him to be a gardener? Probably more often than we care to remember. Gardeners, after all, radiate a quality of light rarely paralleled, almost Christ like radiance; right Jared? Mary is in a difficult emotional space, and uncertainties about the future weigh upon her. Jesus speaks directly to her and the blinders fall away. Sometimes the clarion call of the Christ has the power to snap us out of our fog. When he calls us by name, things change. Hope is renewed. Possibilities crop up all around us.

Mary is so excited that she wants to grab hold of Jesus and give him a big hug. But the Risen Christ says something quite interesting, "Don't hold on to me, Mary." Later, Jesus will say the opposite to Thomas—inviting Thomas to touch his wounds (20:27). Perhaps Mary's response reflects a grasping onto her former relationship with Jesus while Thomas's persistent skepticism through John's gospel calls for a different approach.<sup>2</sup> The Risen Christ is able to tailor an approach unique to each of us in our particular spaces. In Mary's case, "Holding on" or clasping to the Jesus she once knew is a problem. As it is for some of us. Jesus firmly says, "Let go."<sup>3</sup>

Mary is no different than many of us. This exchange between the Risen Christ and Mary raises the challenging question of those things we must "let go" of if we want to "follow after" in new circumstances. Perhaps, we need to hear the words, "Do not hold onto the way things once were. I call you ahead. My resurrection means a new reality." What do we do we need to let go of? Nostalgia and privilege perhaps.

Mary was likely a woman of privilege in that she financially subsidized the itinerate travels for Jesus and the 12 disciples (see Lk 8:1-3). Her place of privilege

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<sup>2</sup> On the unfortunate characterizing of Thomas in John's gospel see Elaine Pagels book *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage Books which is a division of Random House, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Many of these observations are taken from Heidi Haverkamp's article in the *Christian Century* (April 7, 2024).

and needing to “not hold on” raises questions of privileges we carry. Privilege, potentially, keeps us from following the Risen Christ into new territory.

Tim Albert recently authored a book entitled *The Kingdom, The Power and The Glory*. It is a critique of Christian communities in North America so threatened by social changes that increased levels of violent rhetoric, acts, and legislation are on the rise BY CHRISTIANS. These attitudes and actions are directly opposite of Jesus and the Christ of the early church. We have a treasure in clay jars which is meant to be broken open and shared, not hoarded in bank accounts, territories, and land investments. If we need legislation to invite family and friends to a better life, there is something seriously wrong! The text ends with Mary leaving the tomb and she becomes the apostle to the apostles. If we hold onto the privilege of the past, we will handicap our discipleship to the Christ who goes ahead of us.

Brent shared two weeks ago about the intent of Mennonite Church Saskatchewan to work with the Youth Farm Bible Camp Board to release them from the umbrella of MC Sask. There are other wonderful organizations Mennonites have previously entrusted into ecumenical and charitable oversight; think here of COSA and MEDA. Mennonites still participate in these great agencies, but the project is bigger than just Mennonites. Maybe the time is coming for us to “let go” of other institutions as well.

In an article from *The Christian Century* in Sept 2023, author Mac Loftin detailed the theological response of a Christian theologian, historian, and priest Michel de Certeau in response to the dying of both our “civilization and faith tradition”. His interpretation celebrates the empty tomb. It is a good article, but dense, so I will summarize it in two sentences. “For Certeau, the heart of the Christian faith is the empty tomb and the angel’s words: “He is not here; he has gone to Galilee.”” Mary Magdalene and the disciples find the tomb empty, and they are invited to search for the Risen Christ who has gone before us.<sup>4</sup> This means that we do not beat back the stranger, or assimilate the stranger. If the tomb is empty and the Risen Christ is out there, we are invited to go out there to see what this Christ has been up to and share our stories of his teachings and that there is renewal possible for people and communities. Jesus is here among us, surely. But the tomb is empty and the Christ is out there: down the hall of your residence, across the block on your street, beyond the boundaries we have arbitrarily made.

The Christ goes before us—what does that mean as we near the end of life? Our MAID series in our Adult Learning sessions, which begins next week at 9:30 will help us probe questions of our mortality. We can not hold on to our skin and

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<sup>4</sup> Mac Loftin, “A better response to the decline of the Christian West” in (*The Christian Century* (Sept 2023: pp 56-59)), p. 58.

bones forever. We all will need to let go. Since such is the case, how shall we live well and how shall we die well? Following the Risen Christ in this process of living well now and preparing for a good death seems so rich compared with a desperate clinging to the people we once were.

There is much good news from John 20:1-18, and I will close by summarizing some of the good news I have taken from this Easter account.

- First, we often find ourselves struggling in the dark with personal, familial, institutional or political issues. We often live in grief or fear. Angels and Jesus are patient and will keep approaching us in our darkness. Jesus and the Resurrected Christ are not afraid of the dark.
- Secondly, we are not only given permission “to not hold” on to vestiges of the past, we are commanded to let them go. What do I, you, and we need to let go of??
- Thirdly, relinquishing our privilege, nostalgia, and illusions of immortality frees us up to follow the Risen Christ into the future. The tomb is empty. We are given great hope to get on with the opportunities of this day because Christ has gone before us. We are not alone in moving into the future— Christ is already there. And that is very Good News.

Christ is Risen! *He is risen indeed.* Once more with conviction (*repeat*). Amen.

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