

The Resurrection of Our Lord 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

April 11, 2020

John 20:1-18

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

You may find yourself watching a lot more television these days. I realized that whether I am watching old television shows, or new movies, or just plain old commercials, I notice that people are doing things that I don't get to do. Like hugging, like handing things to each other. Like not washing their hands after they pump gasoline. Like going to concerts. I am aware now of things that I wasn't aware of before. The TV show is telling a story and I'm paying attention now to things that the director wasn't concerned about when she or he was creating the story. The experience of the pandemic gives me a new set of eyeglasses for looking at TV. For looking at art and literature. And even for looking at the Bible.

On the sign in front of our church we've temporarily posted some words from the book of Ecclesiastes. "A time to refrain from embracing." You surely know the part I'm talking about, because Pete Seeger wrote a song and The Byrds made it famous. *For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.* A time to refrain from embracing. No hugging and touching. I don't know about you, but I'm eager to get back to embracing. I'll make a deal with the author of Ecclesiastes. Let me get my embracing back, and I'll give up gathering stones forever! I'm looking forward to the day when state governors ban the gathering of stones for the public good. All I want is to my favorite greasy spoon diner and order breakfast with hash browns and coffee. I don't need to gather stones. Let's give than up instead.

So I look at the Bible differently, these days. And lo and behold, in the great Easter story— the discovery of the empty tomb by Mary Magdalene according to John's gospel— we have an instance of social distancing! In verse 17, Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold on to me." It's a detail that normally gets overlooked in the overall commotion and confusion and drama of the Easter story. The large message of Easter, the billboard of Easter, is that God's power triumphs over death. In words from the Apostle Paul, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." So a funky little detail can be easily overlooked.

And yet, artists have tried to capture this moment for centuries. Our modern translation says— very accurately— "Do not hold on to me." But the influential King James Version of the Bible

translated it this way: *Touch me not*. And the possibly even more influential Latin Bible of Jerome translated it this way: *Noli me tangere*. Touch me not, in Latin. *Noli me tangere*. Over the centuries, this moment in the Bible has been depicted by artists using the Latin phrase from the Latin Bible: *Noli me tangere*. A number of great paintings by the masters, many more paintings by others, icons, and stained glass. In the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the Mary Magdalene Chapel proclaims to be built over the exact spot where this encounter occurred.

What does this detail mean? Why can't Mary Magdalene hold on to Jesus? In 1938, a German scholar named J. Maiworm collected twelve types of explanations. One of them was that Jesus was still sore from the crucifixion, so it would hurt if Mary touched him or hugged him. A lot of the explanations are patronizing of Mary Magdalene. That she is a clingy woman, a girl with a crush on Jesus. Or some make reference to her supposed past as a prostitute, which is a conclusion that has no direct evidence in the New Testament. Because John tells us that the burial garments are lying in the tomb,' the German scholar K. Kastner wrote in 1915 that Jesus was walking around buck naked, which is why it would have been inappropriate for him to have physical contact with Mary. By the way, some of the art in the last couple of centuries has Jesus dressed as a gardener, which is what Mary mistook him for. As though he came out of the tomb naked and found some gardener's uniform lying nearby.

Jesus gives his own explanation of why Mary cannot touch him. *Because I have not yet ascended to the Father*. In John's gospel, Jesus does not distinguish among the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. They are all one reality, which he calls being lifted up. Being hoisted up on the cross of crucifixion. Being raised up from the grave. Being elevated to God's right hand. He calls what we see as separate actions that took place on different occasions as part of a unified work. And the phrase Jesus uses, his "hour," indicates that these things are partly outside of clock and calendar time. His hour and his lifting up include all of these things that happened in Jerusalem in which he accomplishes his mission.

Mary Magdalene is somehow present at all three stages: crucifixion, resurrection, and what appears to be his imminent ascension. When he has completed his work—after his hour is done—he will appear again, and give his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit, and give them authority to forgive sins. After the resurrection, Jesus will be present, but in a different way than before. Mary is unique in that she alone is present at this stage. When Jesus is not quite what he was before, and has not yet quite become what he will be for his followers. Far from being wrong or foolish, Mary Magdalene is uniquely present at this moment, and is charged with telling the male disciples that Jesus is ascending. Mary is the first apostle of the good news of Easter.

Earlier during Lent, we heard the story of the woman at the well. She left her water jug behind when she went off to tell the Samaritans about the man that she had met. Mary Magdalene is asked to refrain from holding on to Jesus, to let go of the tangible, and to bear the witness and the message of the life of Jesus to others.

This Easter, we're very much in a situation like Mary Magdalene. The way in which we have known Jesus in his church, and interacted and been the people of his church— much of that has been taken away from us. The promise of the resurrection is that this death that we are experiencing— and it is death, not just death by illness, but grieving the way of life and the ways of being that are passing away— this death will lead to new life. Resurrected life, better-than-before life. The promise is there. But right now we are like Mary Magdalene. Unable to find Jesus. Looking for a body. Unable to recognize him. And holding on. Holding on to stockpiles of toilet paper. Holding on to stockpiles of pinto beans and spaghetti. And peanut butter. Holding on to anger and frustration. Holding on to regret and disappointment.

Noli me tangere. Don't hold on to me. What was is not what will always be. And when Christ's work is complete, we will be better. Better disciples. A better church. A better and stronger presence in the world. Mary Magdalene was faithful to Jesus before Easter. And in the wake of Easter, she and all the apostles found their lives renewed with joy and with purpose and with power. This Easter, may we as individual believers, and may we as the body of Christ— the Church— aspire to be more like Mary Magdalene. Faithful in the past. Becoming faithful in a new future. *Noli me tangere.* The best is yet to come. Amen.