

“Don’t Cling to Me”
John 20:1-18

So a man and his ever-nagging wife went on vacation to the Holy Land. While in Jerusalem, the wife died. The funeral director told the husband, “You can have her shipped home for \$5,000, or you can bury her here in the Holy Land for \$150.” The man thought about it and told him he would just have her shipped home. The funeral director asked, “Why would you spend \$5,000 to ship your wife home when it would be wonderful to be buried here and you would spend only \$150?” The man replied, “Long ago a man died here, was buried here, and three days later he rose from the dead. I just can’t take that chance.”

We needed a good laugh because there’s not much to laugh about in the world today. It feels like everything is coming apart at the seams. We are embroiled in a war and don’t know how to get out of it. The threat of terror strikes fear into the lives of people all around the world. News abounds about people living under oppressive governments. People in the mid-West are once again up to their necks in flood waters. We can’t come to an agreeable conclusion about global warming and if we did, we really don’t know what to do about it. Nor can we decide whether or not we’re headed into a recession. We’ve talked so long about it that we’ve just about talked ourselves into one. This year the secularists may have come up with their own answer to the proverbial question, “Why do they call Good Friday good?” Why? “Because the stock market was closed and we had an extra day to relax.”

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that the women went to the tomb in the “dawn’s early light.” John, however, makes the point that Mary came to the tomb “while it was still dark.” It’s as he told us at the very beginning of his Gospel – **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not over come it.”**ⁱ You might even say that it’s only in darkness, only when we have lost all hope, that we can discern the light most clearly.

The world may feel very dark, but this is Easter. God’s story does not end in a grave yard. After all that was done to Jesus, God has the last laugh. So we, too, can laugh. The little story with which I began is not just the joke de jour, it makes a subtle point by begging the question – are you willing to take a chance on the resurrection, that it really happened to Jesus and it really happens to us as we experience new life by following him?

Some of you may be very skeptical about the Easter story. Maybe you like the flowers or the music but you keep your distance from any tale about Jesus coming back from the dead. I understand. I can’t get my head around it any more than you can. But over time I have found I have no trouble getting my heart around it.

So I’m willing to take the chance and say, “I believe that Jesus was raised from the dead.” Why am I willing to take that chance? Because if Christ was not raised from the dead, then the terrorists win; and...

evil is stronger than goodness,
hate is stronger than love,
darkness is stronger than light,
death is stronger than life.ⁱⁱ

Is anyone so cynical or so hopeless to really believe that?

Why would I take a chance on the resurrection? If Christ was not raised from the dead, then there is no such thing as forgiveness. One of my favorite sayings, some call it heresy, is that we are not saved because of the cross, we are saved in spite of the cross. Easter is the great “in spite of.” Easter is God’s YES to us which is much louder than all our NO’s to God. Easter is our assurance of pardon.

Why am I willing to take the chance? St. Paul puts it rather succinctly: **“If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”**ⁱⁱⁱ

Can I prove it? No. Do I think anyone else can prove it? No. Would it make any difference if someone did prove it? No. Jesus once told a parable in which those who were experiencing the torments of hell begged that one of them be allowed to go back to the land of the living to tell others what would happen to them if they didn’t shape up. Jesus’ answered: **“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”**^{iv}

Still we tarry at the tomb and try to satisfy our inquiring minds. The Shroud of Turin is in the news again – that linen cloth long believed to have been wrapped around Jesus’ body when he was laid in the tomb. What makes the Shroud even more interesting is the image of a man’s face that somehow is indelibly impressed upon it. It has long been venerated by many as proof that Jesus was raised from the dead.

The Shroud has been examined and tested for authenticity several times. Twenty years ago after Carbon-14 tests, the conclusion was that it was a medieval fake. Now, with advancements in technology and new, high-definition cameras, scientists are about to test it again. What if the tests prove that the cloth came from the first century? Will the world be turned upside down so that finally it is right-side up? Don’t hold your breath. The world won’t be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

Four different Gospel accounts of the resurrection add to the confusion. When you set them side by side you discover that all the details don’t mesh. Thank God. I would be suspicious of them if they did. It would seem like a conspiracy designed to make believers out of all who read them. Like different witnesses to the same auto accident who report what happened differently, so are the Gospel accounts. That is no proof of anything, but it convinces me that this is no made up story. Nor is it mere metaphor. Something happened for which no human words are adequate to describe. The experience of Christ’s presence after he was declared dead and buried

was so real that the lives of his disciples were forever changed.

In whatever way Mary encountered Jesus outside the tomb, she didn't recognize him. She thought he was the gardener. Not until Jesus called out her name, "Mary," did she know who he was.

(That must be what Jesus meant when he taught about the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name and they recognize him.^v And the prophet: **"Do not be afraid ... I have called you by name – you are mine."**^{vi})

Sensing she was about to run up and embrace him, Jesus said, **"Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father..."** The King James Version reads, **"Touch me not."** More recent translations read, **"Do not hold on to me."** I like one that reads, **"Don't cling to me."**^{vii}

The point is not that she should not touch Jesus, as if there was some strange spiritual aura that would cause him to evaporate, or Mary to explode, should she touch him. (Next Sunday we'll hear that Jesus invites doubting Thomas to touch him, though interestingly, it never says Thomas actually did touch Jesus.) The point is, "Don't hold me back, get on with my mission. Don't bask in the glow of this moment, because it is only that – a moment! Don't think we're going to pick up life where we left off. **'Do not cling to events of the past or dwell on what happened long ago. Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now.'**"^{viii} You see, Mary wanted to hang on to Jesus for dear life. Jesus wanted Mary to let go of him for the sake of her new life.

One scholar writes, "The Christian claim concerning the resurrection of Jesus is not that he picked up his old manner of life, but rather that after his death he entered into an entirely new form of existence, one in which he shared the power of God and in which he could share that power with others. The resurrection experience, then, is not simply something that happened to Jesus but is equally something that happened to Jesus' followers."^{ix}

Easter is not about a resuscitated corpse. The risen Lord was much more than that. There are no categories in the human mind to grasp it. God is always much bigger than even our best understandings of God.

Nor is Easter about a revival of good old days long gone. It's about letting go of what used to be so that we can embrace God's future.

Easter asks, **"Why do you look for the living among the dead?"**^x Why do you insist on examining again and again some ancient grave cloth that may or may not have been wrapped around Jesus' dead body? What's the point? Easter means worrying less about what happened at Jesus' resurrection and focusing on what the resurrection means about new life for us. How do we know we have been given new life? There is no mystery according to the scripture: **"We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Anyone who doesn't love is as good as**

dead.”^{xi}

Easter people live as those who believe that love can conquer evil. Easter people are not so afraid of dying that they are afraid to live.

Why not take a chance with the resurrection – not only trusting that Jesus was raised from the dead, but trusting also that you can be raised from dead, not only then – when the day comes for your body to be laid in the ground or for your ashes to be scattered to the four winds – but also now when Jesus calls your name and all that is deadly in you is transformed and you become an agent of God’s reconciling love – a love which cannot be destroyed by anything in life or in death!

So many people buy lottery tickets every week when the chances of winning are slim to none. Why not take a chance with the resurrection where you have nothing to lose and everything to gain!

“All thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”^{xii}

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- i. John 1:5
 - ii. Reversing the words based on *An African Prayer Book*, Selected by Desmond Tutu. Included in the hymnal, *Worship and Rejoice*, (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 2001), #296.
 - iii. 1 Corinthians 15:14
 - iv. Luke 16:31
 - v. See John 10:4
 - vi. Isaiah 43:1, *Good News Bible*
 - vii. *The Message*
 - viii. Isaiah 43:18-19, *Good News Bible*
 - ix. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 134.
 - x. Luke 24:5
 - xi. 1 John 3:14
 - xii. 1 Corinthians 15:57