

“ THE DANGER OF HOLDING ON”
Psalm 118, John 20:11-18, Acts 10:34-43
The Rev. Ryan Lambert
Easter Sunday–March 27, 2005
Copyright © 2005

When I was a child, my grandfather retired from his job in Washington, D. C., and my grandparents moved back to the Northwest. They settled on a piece of property on Lake Pend Orielle in Northern Idaho. The piece of property they had purchased during the early 1970s included a beautiful stretch of beachfront that my siblings and I would eventually claim as our swimming hole. Although the waterfront was spectacular for children of all ages, the property wasn't exactly friendly toward building a dream home. Stretching several hundred feet up a hill, the property included a jagged cliff; and it all sat at an angle that seemed to defy the ability to build upon it. As a very young child I remember thinking my grandparents were crazy to think about putting a house there—beach or not.

Just to show how much a 10 year old knows, over the span of about 15 months, my grandparents' dream home took shape on the side of that hill. Much of the home was built by my grandfather, and each new thing—from building the stairs down the treacherous cliffs, to excavating the property, to taking out trees to open up the lake view—required careful deliberation concerning how such work could be done safely.

I think the ultimate expression of my grandfather's do-it-yourself building approach occurred as I watched him, my dad, and my uncle apply the metal roof. It happened in pieces, of course, but because of the height (and the possible 175 foot drop down to that wonderful swimming area) each person was attached to ropes. As the wind blew fallen leaves around them, I remember watching my uncle as he hung precariously off the roof and attached the last piece of roofing, suspended between the edge of the roof and a tree that would later succumb to an ice storm. He hung there—and held on. I can still hear the echoes of that day. “Hold on! I'm tying off so I can hold on as I attach this piece. Hold on to me!” As I watched in awe, “hold on” was the mantra of that day.

Sometimes holding on is exactly what we need to do. In fact, holding on has become a virtue of sorts within our culture. Hold on—things will get better. Hold on—this thing can't last forever. Hold on—my other line is ringing. And, of course, “please hold on”—our customer service representative will be with you in just a moment. It is everywhere it seems. Just “hold on, I'll be right there.” Holding on to things is rolled up in that “pull yourself up by your bootstraps mentality” that is as beloved as baseball and apple pie. Hold on long enough and things are bound to turn around if you try hard enough. But too often, holding on is nothing more than a frustrating wait until the other shoe drops. Now, admittedly, there is something virtuous about holding on to things and staying the course during difficult times. There is also something virtuous about holding onto people when life is so fragile and our lives are so fragmented by the many responsibilities and pressures of our everyday life. But is that all we do anymore—hold on and wait for the next thing to happen? Perhaps the many echoes of this phrase are what grabbed me when I initially read John's account of the resurrection of Jesus.

Because when Mary first sees Jesus after his resurrection, he simply tells her not to hold on to him. Let's be clear about something: This was only a matter of hours after she had witnessed him dying on the cross; only a few hours since she had watched him writhe in pain and in the end been a broken body upon a cross. But now, he stood before her alive again—and she was not to hold onto him. Put

me in Mary's shoes, and I would be doing everything possible to touch Jesus, to hold his hand, to embrace him and acknowledge that the one thought to be lost to the grave was now standing right there in front of me. She didn't recognize him because it simply couldn't be—it couldn't be that he was standing there in front of her. Or could it?

On **that** Easter morning, Jesus was speaking to Mary about both the physical and the metaphysical as he told her not to hold on to him. Don't do what seems natural. Don't become just another doubting Thomas. Don't require the proof that only comes in the touch but, instead, just accept that it is I, Jesus, who stands before you now and is resurrected. It's that simple in the interaction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene: Do you believe what you see with your own eyes or not? Believe, Mary. Listen as my voice calls you; simply believe, but don't hold on to me. Simple enough.

But then there is also the metaphysical, that is, the supernatural or mystical, level that Jesus is speaking about. This is the level that calls Mary to understand that in "not holding on," Jesus is asking for more than just a restrained physical response. And this is where John's gospel comes alive for us as readers, for whom the opportunity to physically see the human Jesus was never a possibility. The words, "do not hold on to me" call Mary to arrest her desires to keep the news of Jesus' resurrection to herself and to, instead, go and share this news with the disciples. This is the hard part. Imagine, again, being Mary. Imagine you have just seen and talked to a man whose death you have just witnessed. And now you are supposed to go tell others that he is alive! Would you have the courage to speak about such a thing? Would you risk the humiliation of trying to explain something that any rational mind would find ridiculous? I'm not sure I would.

But on that Easter morning more than one miracle happens because Mary does, in fact, go from that meeting with Jesus and begins to tell the story. I know that liturgically we celebrate the birth of the church on Pentecost; but it seems to me that Mary is the first post-Jesus evangelist—sharing the good news of Christ's resurrection and that, therefore, the church really had its start on that morning. Moving past the mistaken identity, moving past the desire to grab onto Jesus and physically feel his presence, Mary does what is most important on that Easter morning: She refuses to stand in awe and instead begins to tell the story of what she has seen.

Soon the disciples would also follow in this path, making the subtle move from disciples (or ones who follow) to apostles (meaning the ones who are sent out). I imagine it was no small task to completely change one's mind set and begin to tell the story rather than merely following along after someone—especially someone like Jesus.

And that is why on Easter Sunday we hear not only the Gospel reading that proclaims, "He is alive, he is Risen." It is true, and on this day we must take the time to celebrate that fact. This is the single most important day in the Christian year, because although Christmas has taken on a greater cultural importance, Christianity would not exist without the truth of salvation that emanates from our Easter celebration. "He is Risen!" And so are we! Our sins and failures are washed away and life has begun anew. No longer are we confined by the darkness of Good Friday, for even the weight of the world's sins could not keep Jesus in that tomb. And so celebrate we must. Bring on the Easter lilies, trumpets, and all that is Easter.

But there is more to Easter than just this one day. I often hear Christians described as "Easter people." That is the way I often describe our tradition: We are an Easter people. By this I mean we constantly live with the reality of the resurrected Jesus as our constant blessing. I'm not sure I want

to change that statement; but I do want to modify what it means.

On this Easter morning, I am filled by the echoes of John's gospel as I hear Jesus tell Mary not to hold onto him. I also hear the book of Acts proclaim our duty to share the word: "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." Share the good news; speak what you know to be true.

After Christmas I often hear comments about allowing the Christmas spirit to last all year long. An ecological slogan says simply, "Every day is earth day." These are great and important sentiments, but I don't think we want to make any similar proclamations about Easter. Instead, I think there is a very real reason why Easter is and should be just one solitary day. Quite simply, it is dangerous to hold on.

It is dangerous to hold onto Easter if we stay too long in the glow of the resurrection without preparing ourselves to move onto the work of being apostles. Growing up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), I always took great pride in our denominational name; but my childhood pastor often spoke of the need for Christians to move beyond merely being disciples to, instead, growing and maturing enough in our faith so we no longer need simply to follow. Rather, we become strong enough in voice and faith that we can begin the process of speaking faithful truths and sharing the story of a faith begun in the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

That is the challenge that sits before us today. Just as Jesus implored Mary not to hold onto him, I say to each one of you: Revel in the celebration of this great day. Enjoy the Easter bustling, the family, and the wonderful meal you have planned. May this Easter be a celebration of renewal and life as we recognize that the Lord is Risen and we are changed due to this truth.

But let that not be the end, but a beginning. He is Risen Indeed! And as Jesus Christ has risen so, too, have the needs of our world. They have risen to such a height that it is dangerous to linger too long in this Easter glow. There is work to be done!

Feed the hungry, bring new peace into your relationships, listen anew for the voice of Christ leading you in service, walk with softer footprints upon God's earth. This is the day of resurrection—a day when hope springs eternal.

Let us go from this place inspired by the hope of this new day, and let us get to work. The risen Christ calls to you and to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.