



Do Not Hold Me

April 4, 2021

Even Jesus, On EASTER morning instructs MARY MAGDALENE about SOCIAL DISTANCING and Protocols! A week ago, the Governor of our State issued an Executive Order removing all State Mandated prohibition; meaning that just as with the New Testament, instead of the Book of Leviticus and LAWS, each of us are responsible not because it is the Law, but because we can care for and protect one another and Creation. If suddenly the Church declared that we were no longer required to follow the 10 Commandments, I pray we would not all rush out to commit murder and adultery! Instead, each of us would govern our own actions, having learned from our faith and life experience to care for and be responsible for one another.

We are very much CHILDREN OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT, who have difficulty moving beyond our rational intellectual understanding. As violent as many of the stories of the Old Testament, as miraculous as the Birth of Jesus, much of this is logical, reasonable and understandable.

Abram trusted God, and even as impossible as childbirth to a couple where she was 80 and he 100 years of age, it was reckoned to Abram as righteousness that he never gave up trusting God!

God promised Moses to guide Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Promised land, and even if it took 40 years, God did what was promised not only to get from here to there, but from Slavery to Faith.

Even though David lusted after the wife of Uriah, committed adultery and murder, because David never gave up on God, God continued to bless David's descendants for generations after.

God loved the world, so God gave to Us God's own child.

These are extreme commitments, but each is fulfillment of expectations we were taught to believe.

EASTER Morning is different, RESURRECTION is a catharsis. Jesus suffered, was abandoned by everyone whom he loved and he died on the cross as a demonstration of power and shame. HOWEVER, instead of what our rational minds tell us, that DEAD is DEAD, having endured pain & suffering to death; after betrayal, condemnation, abandonment; when there is only a dead/lifeless body sealed into a stone tomb, God raised Jesus from death to life, to demonstrate that NOTHING, not Angels or Governments, No Height, nor Depth, no Power, not even Human Death could separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Our Gospel tells a very down-to-earth human story about something all Christians struggle. We love Jesus' Parables. We quote his teachings and sermons. But there is this odd claim of having a REAL RELATIONSHIP with the Resurrected Jesus, we all want, but few of us admit having had those Resurrected talk to us.

Most of us cope with this void by turning our faith into an INTELLECTUAL SET OF BELIEFS, quoting The Apostles' Creed or something from our Confirmation. *"I believe in Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God"* HOWEVER, The Gospel of John portrays this encounter with Mary in images that are decidedly NOT abstract or intellectual; but instead visceral, emotional, and deeply personal. As Jesus did with Mary, Jesus comes to us, not as a general idea, or a ghostly spectre, but as a presence that reaches beyond our minds' rational powers of knowing; touching us through feeling, hearing, touch, smell, taste, in ways that are often as unconscious as they are visceral. In Bible Study discussion this week, we noted that the Biblical phrase "WORSHIP OF THE LORD" can just as easily be translated as "FEAR OF THE LORD", and in this passage Jesus challenges our FEARS with LOVE OF THE LORD. One of the reasons why the Church often practiced ritual, is that God would be known in the muscle-memory of our tissue, in the feel of our foot's arch in wet grass at sunrise, in the inflections of a friend's voice. The point of faith is not that we choose fact versus fiction, but that at least temporarily at moments in our lives we display a willingness to have our most empirical intellectual gestures humbled, and we have faith to endure our fears.

The story from John begins "Early on the first day, while it was still dark." Reminding out muscle memory of the First Creation. In the Dark, on the First Day, rather than the Resurrection being a conclusion / ending, this is a new Beginning.

The story has two parts: in the first, Mary Magdalene was the first to reach the tomb and witness the stone was removed. Other Gospels suggest she came to try to anoint the dead body, but John seems to have a different intent in her coming. As the first to witness the empty tomb, Mary ran to tell news of the tomb being opened and Not Knowing where the dead body might be. The two disciples Simon Peter and John race to the tomb, and John arrives before Peter. A whole number of theories have been suggested over time, but I like Professor Raymond Brown's the best, that the disciple who was closest to Jesus in love was the most ardent in searching for him and to believe in the EMPTINESS OF DEATH'S TOMB, the EMPTY GRAVE CLOTHES and the BEGINNING OF SOMETHING NEW. There is no contrast here about their role in the Christian Community, only about the desire to believe. Which means that by her coming, then running to tell these two, MARY MAGDALENE demonstrates the greatest love for Jesus among the disciples.

Both the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John get to this moment in time, after witnessing the empty tomb, the witnesses went away uncertain what it all means. But, for Mark, this was the completion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ; for JOHN, the second part of John's Easter morning introduces something NEW, something

personal to MARY. Luke's Gospel describes two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, and a Eucharistic experience of knowing Jesus in the breaking of the bread; but according to John, Mary saw him, understanding him to be The Gardener, she looked him in the eye and asked where he had taken the dead body, all without recognition. Only when he called her by her name, did she suddenly recognize him!

Personally, I delight, that she thought he was The Gardener, because that is what the first ADAM was supposed to have been as a HUMAN in RELATIONSHIP TO GOD, The Gardener of Eden, but calling her by name she hears and recognizes Jesus as The TEACHER whom she loves. The very one she had mourned and grieved for, who changes loss and death into hope and assurance.

20 years ago, I was researching my Doctoral Thesis and recognized that, while only a psychopath would ever impose suffering on another person; regularly, suffering does cause us to experience this same kind of resurrection catharsis, where everything we thought we knew is questioned and re-evaluated, the result of which being that SUFFERING CAN PRODUCE EXPONENTIAL GROWTH. SO my first venture was to find congregations that had experienced TRAUMA, Sexual Abuse, a Split within the Church, the Death of a pastor, who later had become a HAPPY CHURCH and grown from the experience. Contacting over 100 different Congregations which had gone through this gauntlet and come out the other side, How many do you guess were willing to talk about what happened? NOT ONE. Each described, while we want to be transparent, unless you experienced this, you really cannot appreciate what happened.

So I took a different approach. Often when churches experience problems, they keep doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results, what Albert Einstein described as the definition of Insanity! Among churches which had been in a crisis, a Pandemic for lack of a better word, what helped them to change?

1. The level of Trust and Conflict are in opposition. So we have to lower the level of Conflict and raise the level of Trust between members of the church, pastor and congregation, church and Presbytery or Community.
2. The church had to possess the resources to make a difference. Here I am not simply talking about money, but time, location, people as well as finances.
3. The church has to have the willingness and ability to invest those resources for the future, maybe that is spending funds of Capital Improvements, possibly becoming involved in a Mission to change the future of others.
4. AND most basic of ALL, the Church must begin to perceive itself as OUR CHURCH. Not simply an Institution, or Club, a family, or Nice Group of People, but the CHURCH is the Body of CHRIST in this place and time, which is personal to each of us and we pray God would make a difference.
5. This has happened and is happening among us as our Church! But I would also suggest that this is precisely where we are with this horrible disease. A sickness that has afflicted the ENTIRE WORLD. A sickness that coincides with

the level of CONFLICT and lack of TRUST in the world.

A year ago, No One had any idea where to turn for help, what resources were needed. OKAY, we all needed Toilet Paper, but what resources would turn this disease? Do you remember the HOPE we felt at Christmas, that multiple Vaccinations were being developed, that in the New Year would be present?

YET immediately thereafter arose questions both of whether everyone would trust vaccinations that had been approved so quickly; COULD the manufacturers make enough for all the Population of the World; HOW COULD it be delivered as soon as possible?

AND YET, the Personal Question of Jesus Calling Mary by Name: CAN WE EMBRACE A DIFFERENT RELATIONSHIP will we continue to compete for dominance and power, or can we accept that no Power, no Government, not the Greatest or Most in Need among us, can isolate us from the LOVE OF GOD?