

Letting Go to Hold On  
John 20:1–18; Romans 6:3–11  
Sunday, April 17, 2022 (Easter)

Living Christ, may your Word *live* in us, that we might *live* in your Word. Amen.

“Do not hold on to me....”

Those are the first words that the resurrected Christ spoke to Mary Magdalene once she *knew* that he was the resurrected Christ.

“Do not hold on to me.”

*Not*, “Do not be afraid,” the first words spoken in Matthew and Mark’s accounts of the resurrection. Not even, “Why are you frightened,” as he says in Luke’s gospel. That would be understandable. One who they thought was *dead* is now *alive* and standing there in front of them. We might be afraid, too. “Do not be afraid,” would be *comforting* words.

But that’s not what Mary gets. Jesus doesn’t say, “Do not be afraid.” He says, “Do not hold on to me.” Because when we are *afraid*, we *hold on*. To the hand of a parent, spouse, or child, looking for comfort or protection, or *to* comfort or protect. We hold on to the *past*. To what’s comfortable and familiar. We hold on to *routine*. To memories. To relics or souvenirs or some tangible token of a memory. We hold on to the way things *were* in the hope that they can be that way *again*. We hold on to our *breath*. We hold on to beliefs, even if they are no longer serving us well. We hold on to grudges, because we have been *hurt*, and we want to keep this person at a distance so that we do not get hurt *again*. We hold on to forgiveness that should have been issued long ago. We hold on to *guilt* or *use* it to hold on to *others*. We hold on to *pain*, even

though it hurts us, for reasons that we can't always fully understand. When we're afraid, we hold on to *prejudices*. We hold on to *control* (or at least the *illusion* of control). We hold on to addictions that we think will make our fear go away, even if only for a little while. We hold on to *weapons* to protect ourselves from that which we're afraid of, real or imagined.

When we're afraid, we hold on. *Mary* held on. Whether to his *hand* or his *feet* or his *clothing*, we don't know. But she was *also* holding on to the Jesus that she *knew*. She was holding on to the Jesus that cast out the unclean spirits that had a hold on *her*. She was holding on to the Jesus who had raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. The Jesus whose feet she had held as she anointed them with oil and wiped them with her hair just a few days earlier. She was holding on to the Jesus she knew *before* he was crucified, dead, and resurrected. But that wasn't him anymore. She was holding on to the Jesus that was *not* right there in front of her. Holding on, not with her *hands* but with her *heart* and her *mind*. She was holding on to the *memory* of Jesus. To the *idea* of him.

I mean, it makes sense. That was the only Jesus she *knew*. The only Jesus she could *comprehend*. Even though she had *seen* her brother Lazarus walk out of his tomb, there was still a part of her that could not *fathom* the possibility of a resurrected Christ. She was holding on to a Jesus that no longer existed, at least in the way that he *did*. And that kept her from seeing the *Christ* that was right there in front of her.

And so Jesus says, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." I'm not done yet. *You're* not done yet. All of this is not done yet. There's something *more*. Something *new*. But in order to *see* that, to *experience* that, to *take hold* of that, she has to let go. And so do *we*.

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote that, “Only where there are graves are there resurrections.”<sup>1</sup> And while he meant that in reference to the power of his own will and his ability to overcome any struggles or pain – that through *holding on* and *pushing through* he could bring about resurrection *himself* – I think those words still ring true for us in a very different way. Because it is only when we let go of what in us needs to *die* that God can bring about *new life*. Only where there are *graves* are there *resurrections*.

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Five months ago, I went on medical leave for health problems due to stress and anxiety. Obviously when Covid came in 2020, it was a very stressful time, as we had to figure out *everything* new – how to be the church, how to be a *pastor* in the midst of a pandemic, how to worship virtually, all of it. Then as 2021 began, the stress turned into anxiety as it all went on much longer than any of us had expected. A lot of you know *that* part of the story; the Elders shared it with you when I went on leave.

But what you *didn't* know was that early in 2021, I had an experience of trauma that I did not even *understand* or *process* as trauma. Something happened that made me feel very scared and threatened and out of control. So I went out and bought a knife. Just a pocketknife or utility knife that I kept clipped in my pants pocket. I *said* that it was because I always found myself needing to cut something or open boxes, and I never had scissors or a knife with me, so I started carrying it as a *tool*. But it wasn't. It was for *protection*. It was because I felt threatened and scared. And so *just in case* something happened, I would be ready. It was always there, clipped in my pocket, and I could put my hand on it and hold on to it and feel *safe*.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>

I remember one night, I was waiting in a restaurant to pick up dinner for my family, and something must have happened to trigger something in me, I don't even know what it was. But I started feeling *not safe*. And I was looking around at these other people waiting in the restaurant, and my heart was racing, and I started thinking, "Okay, if something happens here right now, what am I going to do?" And I stood there with my hand on my knife. And looking back, there was *nothing*. Nothing had happened. There *was* no threat. There was no reason for me to feel unsafe. It was all in my head. But I was *afraid*. And *fear*, whether the source of it is real or imagined, *fear is real*. And it is *powerful*.

I started having pains in my chest. I couldn't *breathe*. I couldn't *sleep*. I was having panic attacks daily. But wherever I was, whenever I felt threatened or out of control, I could put my hand there on my pocket and feel *safe*. And it went on that way for about nine months.

After everything came to the surface and I talked to Jen and the Elders about it, I remember getting ready one morning, and I went to put my knife in my pocket like I had done every day for the past nine months, but I stopped and thought, "Maybe not the best idea in the midst of a mental health crisis to be carrying a knife." And so I *stopped* carrying it. But in December, I went down to Davidson, North Carolina for a weeklong program for pastors experiencing what I had been experiencing. And as I was getting ready to leave, I thought, "Just in case, I'm going to take it with me. I'll be away from home. Who know what kind of situation I could find myself in? I'll bring it with me, *just in case*." So I did.

When I got down there, I met every day with a therapist, a pastoral counsellor, a spiritual director, all these other people, and we started unpacking everything that I had been experiencing, processing it all. We started making connections to *other* traumas that I had

experienced in my life, and how they all shaped the way that I responded to stress and conflict. It was incredibly *hard* and *healing* and *transformative*.

Now, I've talked before about how, when I was 17, I had what I can only understand and describe as an experience of the presence of God. I had grown up in the church, but I really didn't know anything *about* God or faith, and I grew up Presbyterian, so I never heard about people having *encounters* with *God*. But at an incredibly difficult time in my life, I turned to God in prayer one night, and as real as I can feel your presence here in this room with me, I felt the presence of Christ. And as real as you can hear my voice right now – as *physically real* as Mary Magdalene was standing there talking with the risen Christ – I heard the voice of Christ say to me, “I am with you. You're going to be okay.” And that changed my life. It's hard for something like that *not* to change your life, but it was at that point that I got serious about my faith. I did not know anything about Jesus apart from his *presence*, but I knew *that*.

For 25 years, I held on to that experience and tried to recapture it. But by the time I went on leave in November, I had not felt the presence of God with me for a long time. That doesn't mean God *wasn't* with me, just that I couldn't *feel* it. I went from knowing *nothing* about Jesus except for his presence to knowing *plenty* about Jesus except for his presence. And so as I started my leave, I prayed and journaled, asking to experience Christ's presence again. “Lord, help me to feel your presence again, so that I can know you are with me and live without fear.” That was my constant prayer. I wanted to recapture that feeling again, but it just wasn't happening.

But when I went to North Carolina, on my last day there at the end of a life-changing, transformative week, I was mentally and emotionally exhausted. I left the center at the end of

the day to walk back to my hotel, and the place where I was staying was in this beautiful office park type area with ponds and nature trails. And instead of going back to my hotel, I turned and walked down to this nature trail that went out along Lake Davidson, this huge man-made lake. It was December, but it was a *beautiful* day, warm and sunny. But the leaves had all fallen off the trees, covering up the trail that I was walking. I lost the trail a couple of times, couldn't find the path, and that made me think of a prayer that I had heard years before. I knew it was by a monk named Thomas Merton, but I couldn't remember exactly what it was. So I pulled out my phone and searched, "Thomas Merton prayer," and I found it. And as I walked along the trail, I started praying it:

My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always,  
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

I came to this spot at the farthest point of the trail, and there was a bench there that looked out over all of Lake Davidson. And so I sat down and prayed that prayer again. At one point, I sat forward with my elbows on my knees, and I happened to glance down at the ground, and right there at my feet was a seashell. On the muddy bank of a man-made freshwater lake, with trees and sticks all around, there was a *seashell*. The shell is an ancient Christian symbol for *baptism*. And as I sat there looking at it, I heard the voice of Christ say to me, "Let go of *this* and hold onto *this*." Let go of this knife and hold on to this shell. Let go of your *fear* and hold on to your

baptism and the promise made to you in it that God is ever with me and will never leave me to face my perils alone. And so I picked up the shell, stood up, took the knife out of my pocket, and threw it out into Lake Davidson. (Environmentally not the best thing I could have done!) But I had to let go of that to take hold of Christ. I had to bury it in water. Because only where graves are is there resurrection. And as I walked the rest of the trail back out, it was like this weight had been lifted, and I could *breathe* again. It is only when we let go of what in us needs to *die* that God can bring about *new life*.

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Paul says to the Christians in Rome, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” In the early church, when they were baptizing someone, they would submerge them underwater to reflect being *buried*, and then raise them up out of the water to reflect resurrection, so that “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, *we too* might walk in newness of life.” That in baptism we are participating in the death and resurrection of Christ. The old life is gone, and a new life has begun. We are dead to sin, Paul says, and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

*Sin* is not just “the bad things we do.” Sin is all that which tries to separate us from God and from one another; all that which tries to keep us from loving God and loving our neighbor. So in that sense, *fear* is a reflection of *sin*. Not that if you are *afraid* you are *sinning*, but that fear is reflective of the power of evil at work in us, trying to separate us from God and from each other. *Anger* is reflective of the power of evil at work in us, trying to separate us from God and from each other. *Addiction* is reflective of the power of evil at work in us, trying to separate us from God and from each other. *Guilt* and *grudges* and *prejudice* and *violence* are reflective of the power of evil at work in us, trying to separate us from God and from each other.

But what Paul says is that we are no longer enslaved to sin. Through Christ's death, we have *died* to sin, and through Christ's resurrection, we are *alive* to God. The promise of baptism is that in Jesus Christ our sin is forgiven, it is washed away, not through our own willpower or anything that *we* have done, but through the gracious mercy of God.

Paul says later in this letter, "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." The promise of baptism is that we have *died* with Christ, we have been *resurrected* with Christ, and *nothing* will ever separate us *from* Christ. Not sin, not death, not fear, *nothing*. We can *let go* of our fear and our anger and our addictions and prejudices and grudges and our pain, and we can *take hold* of the promise of baptism that God is ever with us and will never leave us to face our perils alone.

What do you need to let go of so that you can hold on to the promise of God in the risen Christ? Whatever it is, however impossible or insurmountable it seems, I am here today to tell you that you *can*. It is *possible*. There is *life* on the other side. You can let go of it. You *have* to let go of it. Bury it in the waters of baptism. Because it is only when we let go of what in us needs to *die* that God can bring about *new life*. Only where there are graves are there resurrections, but the promise of God in Jesus Christ is that *everywhere* there are graves there are resurrections. Just let go of it – fear, anger, control, whatever – and hold on to the promise of baptism in which God holds on to us, forever, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.