

Resurrection Revisits: He Said What?
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One of the things I really enjoy doing on a Sunday morning is slipping into the various adult small groups to hear the conversations that are going on. Sometimes when I try to slide into a room (without being distracting) everyone stops talking, (sort of like when the school principal is in the room...) and then I leave. Haha. And sometimes when I walk in I am all-of-a-sudden the one with all the answers. "Oh good, we're glad you're here. We have some questions for you," which is pretty interesting considering the fact that as I get older I feel like I have more questions than answers. Well, the latter happened to me last week, which really got me thinking about one of the questions resulting in completely blowing my plan for today's sermon out of the water. But that's okay, because God's ultimate overarching plan is always best. That's part of what we are going to think about today. But first let's pray:

Thank you, Heavenly Father, that you hear us when we pray. Thank you that you know us inside and out. Thank you that you love us so much that you will never leave us comfortless. Thank you for your Word and for your Holy Spirit who teaches us, corrects us, and transforms us – even those places that we have pridefully held onto as our defense against our own vulnerability. Speak, O Lord, for your church is listening. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Allow me to summarize the sequence of events on that first Easter morning as told from John's gospel: Early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where Jesus had been laid. When she saw that the stone had been rolled back, she immediately ran to tell Peter and John what she had seen. Then all three of them ran back to the tomb together. At first John just stood at the entrance to the tomb, but Peter ran right in. John then joined him inside the tomb and together they saw the graveclothes left behind. Then the Scripture tells us they went home. They were confused, they were processing, they were afraid. So, they went home to think it through.

Mary however, couldn't leave. She was so broken up by this new (and she thought terrible) turn of events, so upset that Jesus' burial place had been robbed, maybe thinking 'how much more can they do to him?' This woman whose life was a mess and to whom Jesus had brought healing, she was heartbroken, sick to her stomach, her brain foggy with grief and her eyes practically swollen shut from all the crying – she remained behind after Peter and John had left. Let's listen now to the gospel account from John 20:11-18:

"But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. "They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." "When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. "Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." "Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). "Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" "Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her."

The question that was asked in the small group classroom last week was this one, "Why did Jesus tell Mary not to hold onto him?" My brilliant pastor answer was, "I don't know. Maybe there was something about his post-resurrection body. I don't know for sure." As your pastor, as a student of the Scripture, and as a disciple of Jesus pursuing holiness, I'd like to have a better answer than that. I'd like all of us to have a better answer than that. So, I have spent my study time this week reading, praying, thinking, and asking God, "Why did he say to her 'Do not hold onto me?'"

As you might imagine there are answers 'out there' that go all over the map. Part of the problem has been the King James translation that so many ascribe to, that many of the older commentaries are based off of, that translates his statement to Mary in this way: "Touch me not." Compare that to the moment when Jesus puts out his hands and offers his side for Thomas to 'touch' so that he will believe - and we've got confusion. Why Thomas and why not Mary? Why in that moment but not in this moment?

More accurate translations of the original Greek phrase are these: *Do not hold onto me. Do not cling to me. Do not touch me with the intention of not letting go.* Why?

First of all, let's back up to Mary. She was so heartbroken and then she turned around and saw Jesus – the One who had completely transformed her life! Of course, she's going to run to him, fall at his feet, and grab hold of him! Of course, she's going to throw her arms around him. We would most likely do the same thing! But Jesus exudes a royal calmness. In fact, the whole scene displays a glorious, royal calmness that, if we let it, can impact, can infiltrate our lives too. Think about the inside of the tomb. We are so used to watching super heroes these days who twirl around and leave nothing upright in their paths that maybe we transfer some of that to the ultimate hero, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus was dead, his body laid in a tomb, and God raised him from the dead. But the picture we have of what happened when he was raised is not a 'super hero' sort of scene marked by haste with sparks and twirling and exuberance. With the graveclothes still on the shelf where his body had been laid, with the cloth that had been around his head neatly placed nearby, there is a sense of calm. A sense of purpose. A sense of glorious, calm, royalty that continues to this moment with Mary.

Jesus comes to Mary with great love and gentleness. The very character of God is revealed so beautifully in Jesus in this moment. He is the resurrection and the life, but he is also love. He asks her, "Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Way back in the first chapter of John's gospel John records these as Jesus' first words as his ministry began in 1:38, "What are you looking for?" These are not surface questions, friends. Jesus always wants to get to our heart, doesn't he? *Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for? What are you looking for?* He is asking us to examine our hearts. What do we want most? What is most important to us? What do we think is going to bring relief and joy and peace to our lives? As I asked last week, what are we pursuing? What are you looking for? Who are you looking for?

Mary was looking for Jesus, but she wasn't looking for a risen Jesus, she was looking for his corpse. She was mad that someone had taken it away. "Tell me where you have laid him, and I'll take the body myself." You can hear her frustration, her grief and determination in her words. But there was a problem. She was only looking for the Jesus she expected, not the one who had been promised.

Jesus understood Mary's reaction, but he needed to help her begin to understand that he wasn't just a special miracle-man she loved whom she had been following for the past several years. Though he had tried to tell his disciples who he really was, though he tried to prepare them by telling them the truth (Matthew 16:21, "From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead."), their minds could not comprehend. They still had in their minds the Jesus they expected, the healer, the teacher, the victor over the Romans and over the hypocritical religious leaders, even after all he had told them, they were still following that Jesus, not the one that had been promised since the fall of humankind and written about in the prophets. How do we know? Because no one was waiting to welcome him on the outside of the tomb on the third day. No one. But now that sin and death had been defeated, now that the miracle of resurrection had been revealed, now it's time to help Mary, the disciples, and the rest of his followers put it all together and see the magnificence of God's plan to come and save the souls of humankind.

And so he said, "Mary, do not cling to me." "Mary, do not touch me with the intention of not letting go." "Mary, it's time to let go of your limited comprehension of who I am. It's time to

let go of accepting only that which you can see and touch and understand. I came. I had work to do which will not be completed until I head back home with my Father. You cannot restrict me, but neither do I want you to be restricted by clinging to that which you think you must have, but which is only a shadow of what God knows you truly need and desire.”

How often do we do this? We think we know what we want, we think we know what we want God to do for us –

- Please give me that job, please help me hit a homerun,
- Please get me into that college, please bring me a spouse,
- Please give me a baby,
- Please heal me,
- Please let me buy that house, get that car, pass that test...

And all the while, Jesus stands in front us doing something astounding, something miraculous, doing something beyond our comprehension – loving us, forgiving us, healing us, preparing a place for us in heaven, and we are still clinging to stuff, to achievements, to comforts, to those things we can see with our eyes and touch with our hands.

If the risen Christ had remained on earth, he would have remained geographically restricted. Only that person way over there in Mozambique would have his physical presence in a given moment and someone else in Sri Lanka would have to wait until he had finished there before coming to help his family in their grief. But it was always the plan for Jesus Christ to come, to live a life that modeled for us the life he wants us to live, to die a sacrificial death to save us from the eternal punishment of our sins, to rise from the dead on the third day opening the way for us to return to our heavenly home one day, to show himself to well over 500 people after his resurrection to help prove it, then on the 40th day after his resurrection to ascend to his glory in heaven where he prays for us in this very moment. That was always the plan so that on the 50th day after his resurrection, he would return in spirit form so that he could fulfill his promise to be with us always, everywhere, even to the end of the age.

“Don’t cling to me, Mary” was and is our call to open our eyes to the astounding, amazing, miraculous, heart, mind, and soul transforming truth of Jesus’ complete identity – not just this part, or that part, or that other part that makes sense to us – No! **God himself** came to save us, to defeat the works of the devil, those works that keep us in darkness and despair and driven-ness to keep adding more to our plates and less to our souls. **God himself**, the one who created all things, who set the stars in place, who holds all things together, came and lived among us.

† Can’t understand that?

† Can’t grasp how Jesus was God here in human flesh, yet prayed to a Father in heaven, and then is still here in a Spirit even though he left to go back to heaven?

† Can’t get that? Can’t grasp that?

† Well, me neither! It’s mind-blowing! It’s not for our finite minds to completely understand! But by faith, I believe it.

Why would we only want to cling to those things we can understand? If we can understand it, it wouldn’t be miraculous! It wouldn’t be supernatural! It wouldn’t be God, who is beyond time and space, who knows everything about everything because he created everything, who keeps the whole universe in perfect balance, who sees into our hearts and speaks life over us.

I don’t want to need to cling to only that which I understand. I want God to be GOD in my life, to do whatever he knows will help me be everything he created me to be. How about you? Especially if we might get some of that royal calmness as a byproduct, right?

Let’s determine together, as brothers and sisters, that we will help each other not live short-circuited lives, but we will help each other live lives fully powered by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Thank you, small group, for your question. Discovering part of the answer was a blessing for me, and I pray for all of us on this first Sunday after Easter! Amen.