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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado  
The Day of the Resurrection of Our Lord, Series A  
Sunday, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Sermon: Don't Cling to Me**

**Text: John 20:1-18**

Focus Statement: Jesus rose from the dead to give us eternal life.

Function Statement: That they would not cling to the old ways of knowing God.

Sermon Structure: Story-Framed

Doctrinal Locus: "Just as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns for all eternity" (SC, 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Apostles' Creed).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. As a pastor, I have spent a lot of time in cemeteries for graveside services. However, I have revisited the graves of people I know after they are buried, although, of course, I understand why many people do. Our healing is helped when we remember them, and sometimes going to the grave is the only way we can carve out quiet, safe space to remember.

During my mom's hospitalization after her bike accident, I left the hospital a few times to go to her house, where I could feel close to her. Surrounded by her paintings and books, I felt as though I could still cling to the pieces of her that were still here on earth. For, whether it is theologically correct or not, it was hard to believe that she was "still there" while lying in a coma. Her body was still breathing air, but she already seemed gone to me.

I have heard of dogs returning to the scene of an accident where their owners died. When they lose "their" people, animals return to the last known place they were. And so, like a little, lost puppy dog, Mary Magdalene returned to Jesus' grave early in the morning on the first day of the week (Sunday). She went to embalm his body for burial, the last thing she could do to honor

her Lord and teacher (cf. Mark 16:1). She expected to find a corpse, but instead she came to an open grave with the stone rolled away.

Living as we do on the other side of the empty tomb, we may take these details for granted. But not so with Mary and the rest of Jesus' disciples. Wild animals sometimes dug up fresh graves, and grave robbery was also so common in the ancient world that Emperor Claudius eventually had to enact a law proscribing capital punishment for anyone who disturbed or robbed a tomb. No doubt, when Mary came upon the empty tomb, she imagined the worst and that to add insult to injury, somebody had stolen Jesus' body. Remember that even though Jesus predicted his suffering, death, and resurrection on at least three separate occasions (in the Synoptic Gospels), they were too dense to believe and too dull to conceive what really happened. As John reports, "They did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (John 20:9).<sup>1</sup>

So she ran to tell the disciples, who came to investigate. They went in and saw Jesus' burial clothes lying there folded up (John 20:6-7). And while this little detail might not seem significant, it proves a very important point: Jesus' grave was not, in fact, robbed. Despite the falsehood spread by the Jewish authorities that Jesus' disciples stole his body, nobody *took* him (cp. Matt. 27:62-66). Thieves would not take care to fold up a dead man's clothes in neat piles. Whoever removed Jesus' body did so with care. So after making sure that Jesus was really gone, the disciples went home.

"But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb" (John 20:11). She saw two angels sitting there, at the head and the foot of the bier.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Amazingly, she was so overwhelmed by fear and grief at Jesus' missing body, that the angels didn't startle her.

“Woman,” they asked, ever so gently, “Why are you weeping?” (John 20:13).

“They have taken away my Lord,” she said, “and I do not know where they have laid him.” What could be worse than not knowing where Jesus was?

Turning around, Mary bumped into a man she mistook for the gardener. I'm not sure why she didn't recognize Jesus immediately. Perhaps she was half-blinded by her big, salty tears. Or maybe, as an eyewitness of the gory crucifixion scene at Golgotha, she suffered some kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. The last time she saw Jesus' body, he was cut and pierced and shredded to ribbons. Maybe her imagination had so little room for Jesus rising from the dead that she couldn't comprehend Jesus' body after the resurrection. A humorous suggestion is shown in one of my favorite Jesus movies, *The Gospel of John* (2003), where Jesus simply hides crouching behind a palm tree!

“Woman,” Jesus asks tenderly, “why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” (John 20:15).

“Sir,” she replies, “if *you* have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and **I** will take him away.” We may laugh at the strange picture of little Mary hoisting the corpse of a full-grown man onto her shoulders and carrying him away. But grief and love are not always logical.

In answer Jesus spoke but one word, her name. “Mary!”

And even if Mary couldn't recognize Jesus by sight, she knew that voice, that strong, wonderful, reassuring voice that had spoken freedom, forgiveness, and love to her on so many

occasions. Disciples of Jesus always know his voice, for as Jesus the Good Shepherd proclaims, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27).

When Jesus spoke her *name*, Mary instantly recognized him. “Rabboni!” she cried, which is Aramaic for “My teacher!” But Mary called Jesus by the wrong title and name. *Before* his death, it was okay to call him Teacher. Jesus himself said in the upper room, “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am” (John 13:13).

But *now* as the crucified and *risen* Lord Jesus, he is so much more than merely Teacher. He is Messiah, Lord, and Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords! He is Son of God and Son of Man! He is the Resurrection and the Life for all who believe in his name.

And so Jesus told her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father” (John 20:17).

“Do not cling to me” is a strange thing to say. I know that if God were to suddenly bring my mother or father back to life, the very first thing I would do is to give them a big hug—to cling to them fiercely for fear of losing them yet again. Clinging is a very natural thing to do. We do not want to let go of the people we love, Christ included. When they removed my mother’s life support last Sunday, my sister laid in bed beside her for several hours until she finally passed away. And even after Mom died, my brother-in-law practically had to drag Kirsten away from our mother’s body.

But Jesus said, “Do not cling to me.” After his resurrection—and before the ascension—we cannot hold onto Jesus the way that we did before, we cannot have him in the same way we knew him while he walked the earth preaching and teaching. He is still with us until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20), but he is with us in a new way, a better way, a way that we still do not completely understand.

Before the crucifixion, we called Jesus our Teacher. Now, after his resurrection, we call him Lord and God, as Thomas did (cf. 20:28). But even more important is what *Jesus* calls *us*: brothers and sisters! “Go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (John 20:17). Jesus no longer calls us servants or even disciples (followers). He calls us friends (John 15:15) and brothers and sisters (20:17). Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and because of his death and resurrection, we now call upon God as Father. And if God is our Father, then Jesus is our brother. As the author of Hebrews writes, “He is not ashamed to call [us] brothers” (Heb. 2:11). We are brothers and sisters *in* Christ. And we are brothers and sisters *of* Christ! Because Jesus died and rose again, we are part of a new family, a greater family than our earthly families of origin. We are part of God’s family! “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

If you live long enough in this world, death will rob you of the people you love the most: your grandparents, mother and father, husband or wife, brothers and sisters—perhaps even your children. Death always comes at the wrong time and leaves us alone, as it did for Mary Magdalene and the other disciples.

This has been the hardest Holy Week of my life. My mother died a week ago on Palm Sunday after succumbing to a traumatic brain injury sustained in a bicycle accident. During the same week that we remember Jesus’ death on the cross, my mother died. The tragedy of Jesus’ death is tempered by his willing sacrifice and his glorious resurrection. But there is a part of us that, perhaps, feels completely destitute when we are bereft of our loved ones here on earth because we feel as though we will never see them again. We know they are in heaven with Jesus, but we want them here with us.

Yet as Christians, we do not grieve like the world, which has no hope (1 Thess. 4:13). We mourn in the “sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead” (*LSB*). We know that we *will* see them again in the resurrection on the Last Day, when Christ returns to make all things *new* (Rev. 21:5). They are not lost to us forever, only for a time. But if we insist on clinging to them here and now and having them in the same way that we used to hold onto them before, when they were alive, we will lose them. All too easily we turn our dead into idols and memory into worship. We need to let them go if we would have them again someday. In the new heaven and new earth, we will have them in a new way, a better way, a fuller way than we ever could have known them before. In heaven, we will have them without any trace of bitterness, resentment, misunderstanding, fear, regret, or disappointment.

Departed Christians are never lost to us forever because they are in Christ. Christ is with us, and we will be with him someday. And we will be with them. So do not cling to them. Let them go, and let them be with God. No matter whom we love and lose in this life, the question of the angel is fitting for us: “Woman, why do you weep?” Why do we weep and mourn when we will see them again, when we will see *Jesus* again?

Losing my mother during Holy Week has stirred up a lot of feelings, questions, and doubts for me. I wonder if her soul left her body during her coma or after she breathed her last. I wonder whether we did the right thing by removing life support. I wonder if I was a good son *before* the accident. Did I call enough, visit enough, tell her “I love you” enough? Yet—thanks be to God!—all of that is forgiven and hidden in the hands and feet of the risen Jesus. And because Jesus lives, I know that I’m going to be okay, my mom is going to be okay, and *you’re* going to be okay. In fact, we’re going to be *better* than okay. We will live with Christ! “And from what I know of him, that must be very good” (Sara Groves). Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He*

*is risen indeed! Alleluia!* In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit.

Amen.