

Easter Sunday
Holding on For Dear Life
Pastor Morgan Murray
West Valley Presbyterian Church

Text: Matthew 27:62-28:10 The Message

62–64 After sundown, the high priests and Pharisees arranged a meeting with Pilate. They said, “Sir, we just remembered that that liar announced while he was still alive, ‘After three days I will be raised.’ We’ve got to get that tomb sealed until the third day. There’s a good chance his disciples will come and steal the corpse and then go around saying, ‘He’s risen from the dead.’ Then we’ll be worse off than before, the final deceit surpassing the first.”

65–66 Pilate told them, “You will have a guard. Go ahead and secure it the best you can.” So they went out and secured the tomb, sealing the stone and posting guards.

28:1–4 After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God’s angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn’t move.

5–6 The angel spoke to the women: “There is nothing to fear here. I know you’re looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.

7 “Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.’ That’s the message.”

8–10 The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. “Good morning!” he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, “You’re holding on to me for dear life! Don’t be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I’ll meet them there.”

SERMON

Things had gotten entirely out of hand. Someone had thought it was a good idea to have a carnival at the Community House. Truthfully, there was no other place to have it. Our little patch of lawn was the closest thing to a park that the kids in the surrounding sixteen blocks had.

If there was to be a celebration of the end of this year's tutoring program, this is where it would have to be.

I, as an intern just out of college, had limited experience with kids – especially big crowds of them. And there was just so much... LIFE happening. Kids streaming in and out of the house, talking and laughing. And for some reason it became my responsibility to organize games for them.

It was miserable.

In today's gospel reading, we see two people attempting to manage the unmanageable.

Like Pilate, we want control. We want to keep order, to maintain the status quo.

For Mary Magdalene and the others, we want things to go back to the way they used to be.

We all have some conception of God, but can we all agree that, whatever our conception is, that God is bigger than that?

Can we ALSO all agree that God, the Kingdom, and the gospel are bigger than that?

Mary Magdalene is the first person to not only experience but fully embrace this larger and ever-enlarging reality.

In all four Gospel accounts, Mary Magdalene is said to have been present with Jesus' mother and various other women at the crucifixion. After Jesus was taken down from the cross, his mother, Mary and the other women accompanied the body to the tomb. When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene was one of the women who went back to the tomb at dawn and found it open and empty.

In John's gospel, the exchange between Jesus and Mary is even more disorienting. After two angels appear and ask her, "Why are you weeping?" she turns and sees a man she doesn't recognize. Mary supposes he is the gardener, and asks him where he has taken Jesus. The man simply says her name, "Mary!"

What happens next? Translations say, "she turned," or "she knew," or "turning to face him," she cries, "Rabbuni!" which means "Master" or "Teacher." Instantly, she sees the one before her in a different way. She recognizes him as Jesus – her Jesus, her beloved friend and mentor – but his at the same time *more*.

In reply, Jesus the Christ speaks a somewhat shocking line. It is variously translated as, "Do not touch me" or "Do not cling to me" (John 20:17a). Matthew's Jesus responds to the women's grasping of him with, "Do not be afraid!" The Message: "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that."

What is going on here? Is Jesus being aloof? He is distancing himself from those he has loved so well, those who have loved him and been wild with grief over him?

Or is he saying – and Mary is perceiving – that resurrection means more than merely "coming back to life." Jesus is now present to her according to an entirely new order of living. The broken body of Jesus of Nazareth was placed in a tomb. The one standing before her now is the very same Jesus, now fully the Christ.

It is no small thing for all the gospel writers to acknowledge that the first witness to the resurrection was a woman, especially since the culture in which they lived did not accept women as credible witnesses. But Mary is not only one who sees. She is also one who understands.

Over much of Jesus' ministry life, Mary Magdalene had been a witness to Jesus of the Nazareth the person. But after the resurrection, she also had the unique experience of being the first witness to the Omnipresent Christ. Then, acting on his charge to her and the others to tell his friends what she had seen, Mary passed on the good news to the "apostles" (Mt 28:8). Thus she is the "apostle to the apostles," which is exactly how the early church, commentators throughout history, and even early liturgical texts honor her. According to the early definition of an apostle as a "witness to the resurrection" (Acts 1:22), Mary is the first apostle. (Rohr Universal Christ 192)

It is no insignificant that it took a woman who first loved Jesus personally to build a bridge from Jesus to Christ. Unlike the Twelve disciples who are consistently portrayed as being very slow to understand and who repeatedly respond to Jesus' teaching with hesitancy at best and downright resistance, denial and betrayal at worst, Mary is able to quickly grasp the reality of Jesus as Christ. She trusts Jesus voice even when she couldn't recognize him. Her ability to perceive the loving character of her Lord goes far beyond empirical knowing, which is always dependent upon rationality, reason, and various kinds of proof. Mary is able to accept her role as the First Apostle by not grasping on to the old Jesus, but by letting him introduce her to the even larger Christ. (Rohr 193)

We usually have to let go of Jesus on one level before we accept and believe in Jesus the Christ.

We have stop worshiping of Jesus as merely our personal Lord and Savior if we are to bear witness to him as Savior of the World (John 4:42).

For Jesus to known as Christ among us, he must surpass the bounds of space and time, ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender. Frankly, he must rise about any religion formed in his name that remains tribal, clannish, xenophobic, or exclusionary. Jesus Christ, Lord of ALL, of Every Thing, is who Mary and the other women met on their way back to the others. Unless we are prepared to let Jesus Christ BE more, be greater, and continue to break down our categories and our conditional allegiance, should we be surprised that the church that bear his name face a crisis of credibility?

PUNCHLINE: To hear the gospel afresh. There are things we must unlearn about the Resurrection story. This story doesn't offer the promise that we won't die. It promises that we are now able to really live. And the gospel isn't just good news for a few human beings. The gospel is a declared and described reality for every single atom of Creation.

Pilate wanted political stability certainty, so he sealed the tomb and set guards. Mary Magdalene, upon seeing her risen Teacher, wanted to hold on to him for dear life. Both of them wanted things to go back to normal.

But when we experience the resurrection, Normal is over. Nothing can stop Life from breaking through. It turns everything upside down. Or more accurately, it sets everything right side up.