

“Loss and Life on Easter”
John 20:1-18
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Easter Sunday
April 12, 2020 during the Pandemic

Easter feels very different this year. No smell of lillies wafting through the sanctuary, no robed worship leaders. The only brass-tinged choirs we'll hear are recordings from the past and I'm preaching in the living room to myself. That's not weird. It's not all bad, of course. We've seen again what generations of Jesus followers have told us - that the church is not a building; the church is not a business; the church is not a thing. The church is God's people, connected in phone calls and zoom worship and actions of compassion and justice and care undertaken mostly now from home, the best most of us can do to preserve the lives of our neighbors and those heroic health care workers on the front lines. The body of Christ is alive in the world even and perhaps especially when the world shuts down.

But on Easter we have to acknowledge that we're all putting on a good face. Sitting at home is no substitute for being together. Recorded music is no substitute for a choir singing their hearts out on Eastern morn. Passing the Peace across computer screens is no substitute for a warm and welcoming embrace. All this while the healers amongs us take care of thousands of fellow human beings who are sick, struggling to live, and we all worry about the financial future. To state the obvious, this is not the Easter we planned. It is not the Easter we hoped for. It is not the Easter we would choose if we had the power to make it so. Easter morning this year includes its own bit of loss, Easter's own little death.

Acknowledging the obvious must be important since that's the first thing the resurrected Christ cajoles Mary Magdalene into doing at the tomb. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Jesus already knows the answer to the question. She's weeping because he's dead. She's weeping because she saw this person that she loved executed and that trauma doesn't just go away. She prepared his body for burial with her own hands. She's weeping because she's grieving. There's no question in my mind that Jesus already knows this. So why does he ask her this question?

It could be that Jesus is more of a prankster than we care to acknowledge, pretending to be the gardener just so he can screw with Mary. This isn't the first time that Jesus seems to mess with grieving people at dead-end tombs. As we heard a few weeks ago, when he learned that his dear friend, Lazarus was sick he waited two critical days before going to see him. He let him die, he let the people who loved Lazarus grieve rather than rush there to save him. Maybe Jesus is just like any other prankster you might see on social media these days. The guy who asks his sibling, "What sound

does a whale make?” before spitting water in his sister’s face, or the girl who puts her hoodie on backward so she can stand in the refrigerator and scare the mess out of her mom. Maybe Jesus is more of a prankster than we care to admit. The worst kind of prankster - dishing out the most terrible April Fools joke you’ve ever seen for his own personal enjoyment.

But I wonder if Jesus asks Mary the obvious question because he wants Mary to take a closer look at her own grief. To pay deeper attention to the nature of that loss. What, specifically, are you grieving, Mary? What is at the root of your loss? Is it fear of facing the world without your teacher, your friend? Is it the uncertainty of what’s next for you? Is it the hunger for that person who knows you better than you know yourself? Or is it knowing that you will have to fill the gaps that he left? Why do you weep? Mary, for her part, isn’t in any mood to be analyzing her grief. She’s been grieving for days at this point. And, anyway, she doesn’t have time to engage, much less answer the question, because one sentence later her grief comes to a screeching halt as she recognizes that the man questioning her is Jesus himself.

“Rabbouni!” Mary says in Aramaic, reaching out, as people with affection for one another do, as Mary must have done so many times, to embrace her teacher and her friend. But Jesus stops her - “Do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” “Don’t touch me,” literally, in the Greek. It’s an astonishing command for a number of reasons not the least of which Jesus never says anything like this anywhere else. He does say “do not” a lot in John’s Gospel. “Do not be astonished,” “do not sin anymore,” “do not be afraid,” “do not let your hearts be troubled.” But never “do not hold onto me.”¹

It’s an astonishing prohibition to offer to a loved one who has been grieving someone’s absence. Imagine a military parent arriving home from a tour of duty saying to their children, “Do not hold onto me.” Imagine a spouse returning from near death virus treatment in isolation saying to their loved one, “do not hold onto me.” Imagine any scenario where someone was presumed dead, reappearing to their loved one only to say in the midst of this kind of overwhelming joy, “don’t touch me.”

Holding on to Jesus is Mary’s first instinct upon seeing her teacher and her friend and Jesus rules it out with a rationale that is the opposite of what I would expect. “Do not hold onto me because I have not yet gone up to the Father?” No, no that’s the

¹ In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, this Greek word, “haptomai,” appears often, usually in connection with Jesus’ healing. But it appears nowhere else in the book of John. People make physical contact in John’s Gospel - Jesus spreads mud on the eyes of the man born blind. Mary anoints Jesus’ feet. Jesus washes the feet of the disciples. But the word “touch” is only used here, maybe because by the time the Gospel of John was written the community that produced it had no ability to embrace Jesus the person. Coming into literal contact with God in the flesh was an impossibility 50-70 years after his death. John’s community would likely never experience the kind of literal healing by Jesus’ touch that some in Mark’s community had actually seen with their own eyes. Holding on to Jesus was out of the question. Holding onto God-in-the-flesh was a longing that would not be fulfilled.

opposite of what I would expect. Hug me now because I have not yet gone to God. Embrace me now because I have not yet departed. Hold onto me now because I'm only here for a little longer.

But you see that kind of rationale - Mary's rationale to hold onto Jesus - the one that I have shared - the one that we have typically shared at Easter - is built on the assumption that resurrection means that everything can go back to the way it was before. That Jesus can return home with Mary and the disciples and get back to the way things were before they all saw him nailed to the tree. That death - the ultimate in social distancing - is ended by resurrection once and for all. As if resurrection relieves us from having to walk through loss, grief, betrayal, hurt, injustice - all those things that the disciples experienced before.

Mary tries to move quickly past the loss, pushed there by profoundly good news. It's the same way we've all treated Easter for centuries. Resurrection is the antidote to our grief. Resurrection offers protection against all loss. *We can forget Golgotha, forget the agony of our Lord, forget the loss of hope, forget the pain of loving.* Resurrection is one big eraser on the whiteboard of painful living.

And yet the first Easter wasn't like that at all. I don't just mean the live instruments, and the food, and the hullabaloo. I mean the joy didn't completely erase the pain. The good news didn't completely snuff out the bad. The reality of Jesus' reappearance didn't relieve the disciples of their next assignment which would be carried out without Jesus leading them in the way he had led them before, which in the midst of great joy is its own little loss.

Easter doesn't take us back to life the way it was before, it takes us forward into the life God wants to give to us now. Easter doesn't undo death, it provides a pathway through it, beyond it. Easter doesn't silence grief, it refuses to allow it to have the only word. Easter doesn't undo everything that's been done, it makes joy possible where it wasn't possible before. Easter doesn't nullify the past; Easter is God transforming it into something new, which I think comes as a disappointment to some of us.

We want new life without any death. We want Easter Sunday without Good Friday. We want the fairy tale Easter with bunnies that never lose their bounce. Even some of our visions of heaven sound a lot more like recreating the past than receiving a future that God wants to give to us. Jesus - making life great again. We want to go backward to what we knew and I'm afraid the church's celebrations in the past may have contributed toward this kind of fantasy of a faith that is defined by the absence of pain rather than the presence of God's love. The presence of God's powerful love that can transform the worst of what we do and the worst of what has been done into new life.

Which means, dear church that we should not be surprised if Easter brings its own kind of loss for us this year. The grief of recognizing that the new life that Jesus

promises, delivers less than what we hoped for and asks more from us than we likely expected to give. And maybe this is why Jesus wanted Mary to pay a little more attention to her own grief. Because he knows that resurrection comes within grief. New life comes out of the center of death. Not around it. In the center of it. If we look more closely there, we might begin to see what new life is coming.

It's like Kate Bowler, the 30-something young mom and church sociologist with stage 4 cancer said recently in an interview. "We're learning right now in isolation what interdependence feels like and what a gift it is. And the more we're apart, the more we realize how much we need each other." New life is being seen in the loss. "We're allowed to be like beautifully, stupidly needy right now," Kate Bowler says. "We're allowed to FaceTime people and be like, I feel like a mess, and all I want to do is be loved."² Pay attention to your loss - life begins again in the middle of it.

And as disappointing as that may be - to discover that resurrection doesn't take us back to the way things were before, I'm more and more glad about it. When this social isolation ends, we cannot go back to the way things were before. We've seen too much to make us want to go back. This pandemic has unveiled the way our deep inequalities leave those with wealth much more protected than those without. It's unveiled a nation, in the words of the NY Times, "in which professional basketball players could be rapidly tested for the coronavirus but health care workers were turned away; in which the affluent could retreat to the safety of second homes, relying on workers who can't take paid sick leave to deliver food; in which children in lower-income households struggle to connect to the digital classrooms where their school lessons are now supposed to be delivered. . . a nation in which local officials issuing stay-at-home orders must reckon with the cruel irony that hundreds of thousands of Americans do not have homes."³ I don't want to go back to that world. That world needs to die - so we can welcome the one that could come after it.

Pay attention to your grieving, I can hear Jesus saying. Look at it more deeply because it's there where new life needs to come. In fact, the seeds for new life are already there, right there in the losses. We can all see that we need a world where health care is a basic human right. We can all see that it's not good for anyone when half a million Americans are homeless on a given night. We can take a closer look and learn that if individual income had kept pace with overall economic growth since 1970, Americans in the bottom 90 percent of the income distribution would be making an extra

² Interview with Kate Bowler, "How to Live in the Face of Fear: Lessons from a Cancer Survivor," Elizabeth Dias, *The New York Times*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/us/kate-bowler-cancer-coronavirus.html>.

³ The Editorial Board, "The America We Need," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/09/opinion/coronavirus-inequality-america.html>.

\$12,000 per year, on average - a game changer in this coronavirus fight. The seeds for new life can be seen in the death that we see all around. Pay attention.

Pay attention, because the hardest reality on Easter is that Jesus isn't going to fix it for us. We can't hold onto him to make everything right. He won't let us. That's what he tells Mary. Go and tell everyone that I'm alive and I'm leaving. Which sounds a lot to me like, "you don't have to be afraid of anything now and it's up to you to go and tell the world what you've seen. That's all Mary does. She runs and tells the disciples "I have seen the Lord!" the first sermon by the church, that original group of disciples who run around looking for evidence of God's presence in the world and name it. And there is no shortage of that kind of good news in our world today. The doctors and nurses heroically caring for the sick - teaching us what courageous love looks like. We can name that. The countless numbers of people who have checked in on their elder, homebound neighbors showing us what loving your neighbor looks like - we can name that. The teachers who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to make sure their kids not only get an education, but get fed - we name that. The chaplains praying at the bedsides of their corona sick, the priests dying as they bury their Italian dead - we see it and celebrate it. And some leaders at state and local levels - Democrats and Republicans - who have shown us again that the best kind of leadership is the kind that puts people first. It must be named.

That's the assignment to all disciples of Jesus. Name the power of God's life when we see it so that when the world shifts in a way that no one ever thought possible, people have a chance to choose life once again. When the world shifts, we all have a chance to choose God's way of the common good above any ideology, the way of liberation above any tyrant, the way of love above any fear that gets in the way. When the veil is torn exposing the systems that have guided us and directed us and snookered us, we won't go back to the way things were. We will see the new life that God wants to give to us - abundant life - and we will choose it. We'll fight for it. If necessary, we'll die trying to live for it.

Easter feels very different this year. It is not the Easter we planned. It is not the Easter we hoped for. It is not the Easter we would choose if we had the power to make it so. But with the fear of death so present, and the reality of our world's deficits so apparent, and with signs of new life that we already see in the middle of our endings, this Easter may be closer to the first one than we have ever experienced.