

Easter Sunday 2017

Sermon 4.16.17

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-5, 9-17

John 20:1-18

This moment: “Do not hold onto me,” Jesus saying to Mary when she had turned to him, recognized him, apparently reached for him. “Do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” That’s the moment I want us enter.

Do you remember that yearning—when you first felt that desire for someone else, though you had only the barest hope that it might be fulfilled? The sweetness of that; the surprising, unsettling, sweetness of it: do you remember it? Has it ever happened to you? Or are you yet waiting for that in your young life—your first crush, your first *love*?

It might seem unorthodox to spend time in that place on Easter morning in church, on Resurrection morning in church. I suppose the more obvious place to spend some time would be the tomb, now suddenly empty, surprisingly, inexplicably empty. I suppose that’s where we’ve spent time on Easters past—that place that was supposed to contain Jesus, he who simply, apparently cannot be contained. One of my favorite Christmas carols says as much: “Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain.” One of the gospels, Mark, always remembers Jesus as going *out*—out of homes, out of villages, out to the edge of things, out to the wilderness. Here’s one more example of Jesus defying limits, crossing boundaries, always beyond, always ever widening his reach: the tomb that held him but just briefly, three days, two and a half days.

Certainly the gospel reading this morning has us spend some time in the tomb, first with Mary Magdalene standing at the doorway noticing the body gone; then with Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Mary went to get, and their going inside; then noticing the linen wrappings, three times mentioned, and folded neatly, the linen wrappings; and all their seeing and believing—inside the tomb.

Seeing and believing: this is an important theme in this gospel: John, the gospel of “Come and see,” and of seeing that we might believe. So common is it that I preach on it often, so you’ve heard before, yet you’ll hear it again because it’s always worth saying. What we’re to come and see is the anointed of God (in Hebrew, the Messiah; in Greek, the Christ), and moreover that this anointed one is also the crucified one. What we’re then to believe is that, not only is Jesus godlike, but God is Jesus-like—which was obvious while he was alive and

going around doing marvelous stuff (making the blind to see, making the dead alive) but which fell into terrible doubt when he was crucified, when he was killed, for how could that be God?

How could Jesus be the anointed one if he were also the crucified one?

This two assertions would have been irreconcilable to the minds of those who first waited for the Messiah. As it happens, in many cases, they're irreconcilable now — this which us believe, *understand*, that God's favor manifests not in the treasures of this world but in a call to save through self-giving love this world for God's sake, that God's blessing manifests not in wealth or power or vainglory but in wealth spent and power poured out in service and glory given to the all in all.

The “prosperity gospel” — that God's blessing comes in riches, so the rich are to be understood as blessed and the poor can be condemned as weak in faith and therefore rightly cursed? The fact that the anointed one is also the crucified one proves all that false.

The “meritocracy” of so much American thinking and policy-making — that belief that people rise in society according to their ability, and not according to other advantages such as inherited wealth or health of their environment? The fact that the anointed one is also the crucified one calls that whole civic conviction into question.

As to the zero-sum assumptions that so many people live by, not least our president — that there's only so much to go around, and that there are winners in life and there are losers, and that the winners are the blessed ones and the losers are worthily cursed — the fact that the anointed one is also the crucified one calls us all to higher thinking than that, more faithful, more imaginative, more creative. “Don't fight for a bigger slice of the pie. Make a bigger pie!”

Really, the fact that the anointed one is also the crucified one would have us reject any politics that neglects the poor and punishes the needy and crushes the dependent and turns a blind eye to any who aren't self-sufficient, which (not self-sufficient) has been all of us at some point and will be sometime each of us again. We were all suckling infants once, and we will all be sick or suffering at some point, perhaps again. The fact that the anointed one is also the crucified one, then, means that those who suffer aren't to be cast out but are to be made central, those who struggle aren't to be culled from the pack lest we all be made vulnerable but are to be held in love that together we might be sustained. The fact that the anointed one is also the crucified one means that society, this which can indeed be degraded and debased

until we're all in a war of all against all, should instead be tended to and cultivated that the whole creation might, through such sustenance, now thrive, sustainably thrive.

They all *came* to the empty tomb and *saw* the linen wrappings, and the *believed*. This is the thing to which they came, the insight they came to, and the belief that would hold them in conviction.

But I don't intend for us to spend this time in the tomb. We did that a couple weeks ago—in the valley of the dry bones with the prophet Ezekiel, and at Lazarus' tomb with Mary and Martha and Jesus. We did so because, as I said then, I think we as a people would do well if we were to learn how to grieve. I still think that. But it's Easter so this morning we're up to something else. I intend for us to spend this time in that moment of sweet yearning—Mary reaching for Jesus who remained yet beyond her grasp.

I don't know why it should be that this desire isn't much attended to. I don't know how the church might have strayed so extremely from this place of sweet yearning, sweet desire. Sweetness, after all, is prevalent in classic Christian thought. Jonathan Edwards, of 18th century puritanical New England, used the words "sweet" and "sweetness" in his writing frequently, often in naming a primary experience of God's presence and promise, God's beauty and sustenance: "Sweet." Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic, wrote of her encounter with the revealed Christ as, almost above all, sweet: "Glad and merry and sweet is the blessed and lovely demeanor of our Lord." Augustine of Hippo of the 4th century spoke of the sweetness of God as if that were the essence of God. All the way to the beginning apparently: Mary didn't use the word "sweet," and neither did Jesus about their moment in this garden. But I think it's fitting—sweetness. Like whatever flowers might have been planted there, and nurtured to grow; like whatever lush trees sprouting palms or olives or oranges might have been cultivated: perhaps even the air smelled sweet.

John is alone in imagining this as a garden in such explicit terms—this place of burial. All four gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—remember Jesus as having been crucified and buried at Golgotha, the "place of the skull." (Incidentally, the place of the skull, or simply the Skull, earned its name for the rocky outcrop that resembles a human skull. It's a rock face that actually looks like a face, though one staring emptily out. An eerie version of New Hampshire's now collapsed Old Man of the Mountain, or Great Stone Face, the Skull is not nearly so serene or majestic. No, the skull of Golgotha spooks for its having been

watching you before you noticed its steady, unfeeling gaze, watching you, watching you.) All four of the gospel narratives remember this as the notorious place. But John is alone in imagining it also as a garden, a garden well kept, so formal, that it could be thought to have a gardener.

This is significant, of course, as most things are in John's gospel—though I hesitate to be the one to speak to that significance. I mean, I might be the only one in the room who isn't a gardener. I don't have a garden; I don't ever aim to. But that's not to say I don't have an appreciation for gardens. On the contrary...

Gardens are the meeting place of the happenstance of nature and the intention of human creativity. Nature is a void-filling urge: nature goes where it will, unplanned, untended. Humans, by contrast, are more mindful than that. We plan and reflect. We look for patterns, tell stories, make meaning, seek insight. We love symmetry and respond to beauty; and we'll even try our hand at it. A garden, then, is the ecotone of nature and culture: it is the place of meeting for the natural and the social, the accidental and the artistic.

According to scripture, the world began in a garden—a place of nature made fitting for human being. Also according to scripture, people were made to till the land and to keep it. Also according to scripture, people, of whom God is mysteriously mindful, made as we are to be a little lower than the angels and over creation to have dominion: we ourselves might be supposed as gardens, a mystifying mix of nature and nurture. So, that Jesus is a gardener, is *the* gardener: this makes perfect sense. After all, according to John, Jesus, as the Word of God, was with God in the beginning, bringing into being all that has being.

What's more, he then came into time and into history, so to continue to serve as the one who makes of God's creation, with all its raw power, something also beautiful and bountiful for human thriving and wholeness; as the one who teaches us how best to till and keep the creation that all might have life and have it in abundance, through acts of self-giving love. Really, Jesus as the gardener: Mary, I'd say, wasn't all wrong.

Actually, I'd say she stumbled on the truth, though she seems not to have appreciated this at the time, if ever.

No, for she was too moved by the moment when she recognized Jesus for whom he also was—Jesus.

All it would take is his saying her name, just as elsewhere in this gospel he promised it would be: that he is the good shepherd and his sheep recognize his voice, his voice by which he calls each by name, this time, “Mary!” at which she turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”

“Do not hold on to me...”

I’ve heard Jesus’ telling Mary not to hold him in all sorts of ways over the years. I’ve heard it as cold and rejecting—likely back when I felt often rejected by people I might have loved. I’ve heard it as abstracting and universalizing—likely back when I was in divinity and professionalizing my faith. I’ve heard it more recently as Rowan Williams preached from the cathedral in Canterbury when he was archbishop, he who heard it as “Do not *cling* to me,” something Jesus meant not only for Mary to hear, or perhaps not even primarily for Mary to hear, but to be heard as an admonishment to all who’d cling to Jesus as if they own him and understand him and can call on him whenever they’d like him to do their bidding. But this morning, this year, I hear it differently.

Perhaps it’s the stage of life I’m in as a parent. In two weeks, Tobias is going to turn thirteen. This means we spend a fair amount time talking about love, though in a new way. “When is it time?” he has asked me a few times, of intimacy, of kissing and touching and all that such things can lead to. “How do you know when it’s time? How old should you be?” It’s a tough question these days because in many ways the old answers don’t hold. So, how now to think about it?

Surprisingly, it wasn’t until I gathered with colleagues in the weekly Bible study I attend that I had an honest way to answer the question, to think about the matter.

Sitting in a circle of chairs in a church fellowship hall, we read this passage; and then one of my colleagues, Bill, responded in song, “I want to hold your hand, I want to hold you hand.” He didn’t mean it seriously. It’s just where his mind went when reading of Mary’s yearning. “The Beatles struck at just the moment in my life,” he explained. He was fourteen in 1964, just when he began relating to the world around him in a new way. That yearning, that sweet, adolescent yearning: do people still do that? Or has human intimacy been one more facet of life to fall into merely, grossly transactional thinking?

Do we even know what yearning is anymore, what sweetness is anymore?

Sweetness, it seems to me, has a quality of un-fulfillment in it, of yet waiting, yet anticipating. There's something transitory about sweetness: that which is sweet is that which is but for a moment, that which slight and then fleet.

Do we know such slightness, such fleetness?

For the abundance of sugary foods in the modern diet, can we actually sense what's sweet? Really, for the abundance of *everything* in our culture, with the way to improve upon something being to have more of that something—bigger houses, bigger cars, louder music, more food, {more sex,} more toys, more candy in your Easter basket and more eggs hidden in your yard, every year more: sweetness will elude because sweetness, it seems to me, is only sweet in small portions, in morsels of delight.

Otherwise, it's monstrous.

When Bill sang of holding hands—no, of *wanting* to hold hands—I heard Mary's yearning in now the sweetest of ways, and I heard Jesus' response to it as one that holds space for that sweetness.

I also heard in it a theological truth.

Consummation would come; consummation *will* come. There *will* come a time, a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, when God will be the all in all, when we will be joined with God in an eternity of mutual in-dwelling and resilient love.

Meanwhile, though: meanwhile, life in the world can be one of sweet anticipation, the sort of yearning that can rest assured of fulfillment while also enjoying the yearning.

There's so much that's bitter about our world. There's so much that's harsh and punitive and ugly and mean. I've long thought that to be an Easter people is to be a people of hope. This morning, I imagine it's also to be a people of sweetness, of tenderness and kindness, serving up small morsels of delight.

Some of you might know, I've been writing a lot of haikus—these which I realize, right now, at this very moment, are to me small morsels of delight or surprise, bits of sweetness amidst all that is hard and mean. Here's the one I wrote for this morning:

Mary's sweet yearning,
awaiting consummation,
becomes the world's hope.

Thanks be to God.