

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018)

Text: **John 20:1-18** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance, so she ran off to Simon Peter and the other disciple—the one Jesus loved—and told them, “The Rabbi has been taken from the tomb! We don’t know where they have put Jesus!”

At that, Peter and the other disciple started out toward the tomb. They were running side by side, but then the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He didn’t enter, but bent down to peer in and saw the linen wrappings lying on the ground. Then Simon Peter arrived and entered the tomb. He observed the linen wrappings on the ground, and saw the piece of cloth that had covered Jesus’ head lying not with the wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the disciple who had arrived first at the tomb went in. He saw and believed. As yet, they didn’t understand the scripture that Jesus was to rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

Meanwhile, Mary stood weeping beside the tomb. Even as she wept, she stooped to peer inside, and there she saw two angels in dazzling robes. One was seated at the head and the other at the foot of the place where Jesus’ body had lain.

They asked her, “Why are you weeping?”

She answered them, “Because they have taken away my Rabbi, and I don’t know where they have put the body.”

No sooner had she said this than she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus. He asked her, “Why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?”

She supposed it was the gardener, so she said, “Please, if you’re the one who carried Jesus away, tell me where you’ve laid the body and I will take it away.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

She turned to him and said, “Rabboni!”—which means “Teacher.”

Jesus then said, “Don’t hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to Abba God. Rather, go to the sisters and brothers and tell them, “I’m ascending to my Abba and to your Abba, my God and your God.”

Mary of Magdala went to the disciples. “I have seen the Teacher!” she announced. Then she reported what the savior had said to her.

**Pastor Pastor’s Reflections: “Don’t Hold On To Me”**

On the Saturday before Palm Sunday, our Light for the Path Meditation group met right here in the Sanctuary as we do every month to seek light, rest and understanding from the Spirit of God in a quiet and meditative manner.

For this particular session, right on the cusp of Holy Week, I decided to turn to Brother John Talbot’s wonderful book, “Come to the Quiet,” where this marvelous minister offers spiritual practices and exercises that have been taught throughout

Western history by such great teachers as Saint Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Merton, among others.

The practice we engaged in on Saturday was called, “The Cross” and was particularly pertinent to this time in the Christian year where we remember the Passion of the Christ and his own journey to the cross.

For this meditation, we were guided through different stages to take everything about our bodies - our senses, our emotions and our thoughts to the cross of Christ and let them all go, one by one, dying, as it were, to their hold on us and realizing their temporal nature so that, as Brother Talbot puts it, “all that is dysfunctional and out of order more naturally finds its place in the will of God, and we know peace.” By doing this, he asserts, “we [can] know the first fruits of resurrection and new life in this temporary home of the body.”

No matter how many times I hear the phenomenal story of the resurrection and come to this Easter Sunday filled with the beauty of the lilies and the soaring nature of the songs, I am amazed to find that there is newness in the celebration, just as God continues to bring new life to the earth each spring and new life to our very souls through the spirit of the Christ.

This year, we get to experience the story of the resurrection through John’s gospel. The writer of which, as our friend, the Reverend Anne Cohen likes to say, “loves to explain things.”

“ It’s what he does,” she says.

And what he explained this time that really caught my attention anew is in the encounter he illustrates between Mary Magdelene, or Mary of Magdala as Lester described her for us today from The Inclusive Bible as she meets the risen Christ.

John paints a vivid scene of Mary making her way through the dark, on the FIRST day of the week – a lot of firsts will be happening in this story – to the tomb where she is, of course, very surprised to find the massive stone rolled away. And instead of stopping and thinking and remembering what she had been told by Jesus in the days and weeks before, she goes with her FIRST inclination to run and tell Peter and the disciple Jesus loved (whom most scholars think refers to the writer of John himself), and tell them her FIRST impression, that some people have taken Jesus out of the tomb and put him in an unknown place.

So Peter and the loved disciple rush down to the tomb where John tells us HE was the FIRST one to get there, and look in and believe that he has been taken and go back home.

But Mary stays. Somehow she knows with her heart that this is where she needs to be, that this is the place to linger and to feel. Perhaps her soul was starting to guide her instead of her thoughts. Perhaps that’s why she stoops down and looks back into the tomb where she sees two angels sitting where Jesus had been lying.

“Why are you weeping?” they ask her, guiding her to seek even further beyond her thoughts and her emotions.

And as she turns, she sees a man she thinks to be the gardener who asks her the same question, “why are you weeping?” A further urging to look not with her thoughts and emotions or even her senses, but to see truly with her own spirit, so that at the sound of her name, “Mary!” all that is temporal falls away and she sees the Christ standing before her in His full and radiant glory and acknowledges Him as “Rabboni” – her ultimate teacher who has brought her to this place in her life where she is finally seeing with her heart and her everlasting soul.

And here’s the thing that really struck me – Jesus’ first words to her as she now truly sees Him – “Don’t Hold On To Me...”

What a command. What a further confirmation that she is not to grasp the eternal with the temporal but rather that she is to experience the presence of the Christ as all of them and us will experience it in the time to come – as Spirit, as essence, as that which lives forever and wants us to know that we will and do, too,

For this is the message of Easter. The spirit of the Christ resurrected in each one of us, reminding us that we are connected to the great web of life that God created and that will continue to spin forever, perhaps and most probably not in its present form, but in the eternal form of spirit that is the truest and most alive part in all of us.

God doesn’t want us grasping the temporal body of Jesus, or of our own worldly body or anyone else’s for that matter, as that which will save us or be there for us always because there’s no way this body and its senses and emotions and thoughts can be.

The promise Jesus makes in Matthew 28:20 when he says, “lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” isn’t, obviously, a promise to be with us in body, but to be with us in spirit and in truth.

The more we insist on this bodily experience being the be all and end all in our lives, the more frustration we will experience in our lives and the more challenging it will be to hear the still-speaking voice of God who wants to lead us into the everlasting promise of eternal life that Jesus first exemplified for us on that Easter day so many centuries ago.

“When my father died, I was forced to change my relationship with him from one in matter to one in spirit,” writes Peggy Turner Beatty at Ecumenicus in her article, “Clinging to Concepts and Resurrection.”

“I need him to be here, so I am willing to change the way I understand my reality so that he is as close as ever. Through meditation, I have cultivated a very peaceful and real spiritual reality, which gives me increasingly profound reverence for all of life. Oh, its continuing work!” she writes. “I live in the tension between what can be and what is – possibility (spiritual) and concept (matter or thought). I am most certainly not the only one! My peace in this place of unseen reality is reflected to me in scripture, where

Jesus and Paul constantly attempt to change people's perspective to emphasize the spirit. Metanoia - think again...."

See, even those devoting their lives to spiritual direction and contemplative prayer and meditation must work to change their perception. So, please, give yourself a break if you, as I, must work daily to live in the Spirit and be in this world but not OF it.

"Religion, from re-ligare, means to bind back, which is to say, return to your spiritual Oneness in the Divine essence," writes Peggy. "You are made in the image of God, sacred, priestly, holy. ALL religious texts and practices are designed to draw you away from matter and its hold on you and give you an experience of Spirit. Matter is context. Matter is where spirit finds purpose or action. Matter causes struggle and forces us to rise above it! When the Spirit is changed, when it is given priority, then purpose flows from Oneness and benevolence, rather than defensiveness. That's called transformation... When we "have the Mind of Christ" we are awake, enlightened, [and] can see truth from many perspectives...and we can hold the tension of living as spiritual beings enfleshed."

"Don't hold on to me," Jesus says, signifying his body. Hold on to the spirit of me. Hold on to my essence. Don't hold on to the vision of me as one who does it all for you and all you have to do is kneel at my feet. Remember that you will do even more than I have done and that you will have the same possibilities that I have. I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly. Real life, not this temporary thing you deem "living" on this temporary planet.

In his essay, "Letting Go of Jesus," the Rev. Andrew Prior states, "The tomb is empty and Jesus has not only risen but [has] also ascended to [his Abba]. There IS nothing to hold on to.

When we stop "holding on," when we "let go," when we give [in] we are freed from the old dimension and find glimmers of this different timeless life that is not bound to things and time and security..."

"I find I am the most connected when I let go of the surface things," he writes. "I cannot cling to meaning, or hold onto life. I must let go and simply be where I am. There are times when this is eternal."

I'd like to leave you today with this magnificent poem by Father Ronald Rolheiser which he calls, "Mary of Magdala's Easter Prayer" in his book, "Forgotten Among the Lilies."

I never suspected  
Resurrection  
to be so painful...  
to leave me weeping  
With joy  
to have met you, alive and smiling, outside an empty tomb  
With regret

not because I've lost you  
but because I've lost you in how I had you --  
in understandable, touchable, kissable, clingable flesh  
not as fully Lord,  
but as graspably human.

I want to cling, despite your protest  
cling to your body  
cling to your, and my,  
clingable humanity  
cling to what we had, our past.  
But I know that...if I cling  
you cannot ascend and

I will be left clinging to  
your former self  
...unable to receive your present spirit.

Amen.