

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 1, 2018

“Let Him Hold On to Us.”

John 20:1-18

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” John 20:1-2

The Sunday of the Resurrection is not only the greatest day of the church year, it is also the only one that is set by the moon. Easter always falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the spring equinox. As complicated as that sounds, it makes ancient sense, since it means Easter coincides with the greening of the earth. Christ is risen and the whole world comes to life. Sap rises in dormant trees, spring peepers start their peeping, and trumpet lilies spill their sweet smell on the air. The connection is a happy one, guaranteed to renew our faith in the creative power of God.

But it is also a misleading one, because spring is entirely natural. Buy a daffodil bulb in the winter and it looks like nothing in your hands, a small onion, maybe, with its thin skin and scraggly roots. If you had any experience with bulbs, that does not worry you. You know all you have to do is wait. Come springtime it will escape the earth and explode with colors. As miraculous as it is, it is completely natural.

Resurrection, on the other hand, is entirely unnatural. When a human being goes into the ground, that is that. You don't wait for the person to reappear so you can pick up where you left off—not this side of the grave, anyway. You say good-bye. You pay your respects and you go on with your life as best as you can, knowing that the only place springtime happens in a cemetery is on the graves, not in them.

That is all Mary was doing that morning—paying her respects, going to his tomb to convince herself it was all true. It was still dark, but even from a distance she knew something was wrong. She could smell damp earth, cold rock from inside. Someone had moved the stone! Afraid he would become a saint, afraid his tomb would become a shrine, someone had taken him away. His body was all she had left and now it too was gone.

So she ran and brought two of the others back with her, but once they satisfied themselves that what she had said was true, they left her there weeping. She was like an abandoned pup who had lost her master staying rooted to the last place she had been without the least idea what to do next.

Even angels could not soften her resolve. They were there when she worked up her nerve to look inside the tomb, sitting where he had lain. “Why are you weeping?” they asked her. “They have taken away my Lord,” she answered them, “and I do not know where they have laid him.”

It never occurred to her they might be the culprits, apparently, but it was not as if she was thinking clearly. She was operating on automatic pilot, so that when she left the tomb she bumped into the gardener without even seeing him. His only value to her was the he might know the answer to her question. “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” What did she think she would do—have the gardener lay the body over her shoulders, or pick it up all by herself? It was not a reasonable request, but the gardener didn't seem to mind. “Mary,” he said to her and she turned to stare at him. “Rabboni,” she cried out, “my Teacher!”

“Do not hold on to me,” he cautioned her, “because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” It was a peculiar thing for him to say since there is no evidence she was holding on to him in any way. Maybe he could hear it in her voice, how she wanted him back the way he was so they could go back to the way they were, back to the old life where everything was familiar and not frightening like it was now. “Rabboni!” she called him, but that was his Friday name, and here it was Sunday—an entirely new day in an entirely new life.

He was not on his way back to her and the others. He was on his way to God, and he was taking the whole world with him. This may why all the other gospel accounts of the resurrection tell us not to be afraid—because new life is frightening. To expect a sealed tomb and find it filled with angels, to hunt the past and discover the future, to seek a corpse and find the risen Lord—none of that is natural.

Death is natural. Loss is natural. Grief is natural. But the stones have been rolled away on that happy morning, to reveal God's love. By the light of this day, God has planted a seed of life in us that cannot be killed, and if we can remember that then there is nothing we cannot do: move mountains, banish fear, love our enemies, change the world.

The only thing we cannot do is hold on to him. He has asked us to please not do that, because he knows that all in all we would rather keep him with us where we are than let him take us where he is going. Better we should let him hold on to us, perhaps. Better we should let him take us into the white-hot presence of God, who is not behind us but ahead of us, every step of the way.

