### “Do Not Hold on to Me” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Easter, Apr. 9, 2023

**John 20:1–18**

1 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. 2So 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.’ 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

We have reached Easter, the supreme holy day in the Christian calendar. Easter blessings to all on this beautiful day!

The first part of our reading today has mostly to do with Peter and John. They have been in hiding, no doubt wondering what was going to happen to them. Now they hear Mary Magdalene say that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb, and that the body is not there. Not only did they violently kill their Master, but now they seem to have removed his body. John and Peter race to the tomb, John arriving first, but he hangs back, not going in. Peter impetuously charges in when he arrives, sees the linen wrappings lying on the bench, and the headcloth rolled up separately. Then it says John “also went in, and he saw and believed,” but did not yet understand (20:8–9). This is odd. *What* exactly did he believe? That Christ had risen? Probably. But why say that he did not understand? Does that mean he did not yet recognize which Scripture was being fulfilled through the Resurrection? Possibly.

It’s an interesting distinction that the author makes between believing and understanding. Apparently there’s more to *understanding* than there is to just *believing.* There’s more *theological* content to understanding. The author of the gospel—probably a disciple of John in the latter’s old age—makes sure that John gets credit for being the first to *believe*, but he does not say who is the first to *understand*. Further, he has to stick with the well-known fact that Mary Magdalene was the first to *see* the risen Jesus, and that’s what we get next in the gospel story.

Mary is weeping at the tomb, when she sees two angels. After she speaks to them, we hear no more about them. But then, suddenly, Jesus *appears* to her, although she doesn’t recognize him in his risen form, and assumes him to be the gardener.

It is when he speaks her name that she recognizes him and says “my teacher!” Mary was the recipient of Jesus’ healing ministry, and became his friend and co-worker. It was his friendly voice saying “Mary” that made her recognize him.

Filled with joy, she wants to hold on to him, but he tells her not to, since he has not yet ascended. It’s as though his new body were *meant* for ascending. He then commissions her to go to his disciples and tell them “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). This is important. God is the Father of Jesus and of all his disciples. They should think of God as their *own* father, not just as *Jesus’* father. In fact, the Father is the Father of *everyone*. It is true for us, as well. The message of the Fatherhood of God is at the core of the gospel teaching. We are all children of the heavenly Father. As Paul preached to the Greeks: “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth . . . he is not far from each one of us. For . . . we too are his offspring” (Acts 17:26–28), meaning we *all* are his offspring.

Mary went and announced what Jesus told her to the apostles, making her an evangelist to the apostles. We know from other gospel readings that not all of the apostles immediately accepted Mary’s report as true, or believed it to be real, until they personally were met by the risen Jesus.

Wherever the gospel is preached, Mary Magdalene will be known as the first to see and recognize the risen Jesus, and the first to be given a commission by the risen Jesus. This makes her a leader comparable in importance to the apostles themselves. There were other women leaders in the Jesus movement. In the epistle to the Romans we find out that there is a woman apostle named Junia (16:7), so Mary might possibly later have taken on that title, too. We don’t know, but she would be justified in doing so, since she is the first one whom Jesus sends out after his resurrection, and the word “apostle” means “one who is sent out.”

The story shows how Jesus transcended the male hierarchy of his day. The sisters Martha and Mary of Bethany were also leaders in the Jesus movement. Luke 8 documents that a group of women provided funds for the Jesus movement (Luke 8:2–3). So whether we are talking about material means or spiritual qualities or messages entrusted, women were among the leaders in the Jesus movement, and were among the first to testify to his Messiahship—specifically the woman at the well and Martha (John 4:29; 11:27), and then to his risen status—namely Mary and the other women (Matt 28:10; John 20:18).

Of course, the men are crucial to the spread of the gospel message. Peter gives an unparalleled powerful sermon on Pentecost, gaining 3,000 converts. And the apostles go on to evangelize throughout Jewish and Gentile lands in the Mediterranean world in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Men and women alike are leaders in the Jesus movement, sometimes together, as with the couple Priscilla and Aquila, church leaders in Corinth and Ephesus (Acts 18:1–3, 24–26; 1 Cor 16:19).

It is still true today, that men and women should work together. Men and women, working together for the kingdom of God—nothing can stop us! Women are as qualified for leadership as men are. This is one of the lessons we can get from this story of Mary’s leadership. We also get the lesson about God as the supreme Father, a spiritual parent to all of us. And we get the message that Jesus is the Resurrection and the life. He has the power of resurrection.

And the Resurrection is only the beginning of the story. With the power of the Resurrection, Jesus shows us that we can have power over the fear of death. We are set free, no longer held back or made infirm by this fear. We are also free from the fear of facing the world alone. While we may be on different paths in our life journeys, we all have the same Father and we are all part of the family of God. While we may have different opinions, when united on the same goal we can achieve so much. With Jesus at our side, working with Spirit, nothing is impossible. Imagine the possibilities in your life. For He is risen; he risen indeed!