

Let Go
TEXT: John 20:1-22

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson on March 31, 2024

I began this sermon, which developed from about the sixth entirely new draft, at 2:30 pm on Good Friday. Since 7:30 that morning, the road crew working on the gas lines—who for the past several weeks have been on the totally opposite end of Dix Street, out of my view except for the fact that they park all their equipment behind the parsonage and physically shake the house every time they either leave or return—was starting a new phase of their work.

It seemed appropriate to them, on Good Friday, to begin working directly next to the church, blocking off our Dix St. entrance with cones, and starting in with jackhammers and asphalt cutters, big trucks and smaller bobcats; they set up two tents in the middle of the street so they could work in the rain, scraping and beeping and banging and shaking to do whatever it is they just had to do directly next to a church on one of the holiest days of the year for what would become 7.5 hours.

Which is absolutely the helpful atmosphere one needs to concentrate on a sermon for the biggest Sunday of the year in a week with multiple services to prepare and that will take enormous energy to present. I had pages of notes about the text—the details of first-century tombs, the weird way John always calls himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” the strange race between Peter and John to see who gets to the tomb first, and the necessary rant about how, no, Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute and the Catholic church finally recanted that erroneous teaching in 1969.

Also, as I wrote just those first few paragraphs, Mischief, my cat from hell, had jumped up on my lap (and been tossed off) four times. He cuts off the circulation in my legs, pushes in my computer keyboard, begs for food that he won’t eat when I bring it to him, and who can’t settle down because I can’t settle down because of the banging, beeping mayhem outside my door.

At one point, after tossing the fifth sermon draft, I just put my head down on my desk and sobbed. I was exhausted with the biggest service of the year still in front of me and a sermon in shambles. I had no idea when the chaos on the road would stop, the cat always gets worse with every passing hour of the day, and I still had no sermon at 2:30 on Good Friday, with my energy and sanity slipping away.

And I tell you all that for several reasons; first, because I had already tried every other possible way to start a sermon, second, because it’s the truth, and third, because—as much as I hate getting up in the morning—showing up at a tomb in a quiet garden in the dark is exactly what I wanted to on Friday. Just...Make. It. Stop.

And I imagine Mary Magdalene had it worse. She had been with Jesus throughout his execution. I had to read a book on crucifixion in seminary and just reading about it traumatized me. She watched it. And she watched it happen to someone she loved. She followed the body to see where they put him. She, more than anyone except his mother, loved Jesus most. If I were Mary, I would want to just be alone, use the strength of my anger, frustration, and grief to roll away the stone and any other crap, crawl into the three-foot opening of the tomb, and lie down wailing next to Jesus’ body.

On the one hand, that was part of her job. The burial rituals for someone who died included having the women who were closest to the deceased come to wail and mourn the passing, something that had to be done within three days. In John’s gospel, Jesus’ body had already been anointed with 100 pounds of aloe and myrrh by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. We’re told about that at the end of chapter 19 when those two men took him from Pilate’s soldiers and buried him just before the Sabbath started on Friday.

But there had not yet been a chance for the women to come with their laments. We can assume other women will come at dawn, as they do in other gospels; but in John, Mary comes alone much earlier. It is still dark. Dark is symbolic for John, even while it might also be literal. Mary's life has been dark since the previous Thursday night. She needs her own time of grief, alone, as we often do when life overwhelms.

I imagine that some of you have come this morning in the same condition that I was in on Friday and that Mary was likely in that Easter morning in the dark. For those who are here for good music, lovely flowers, and something traditional to do before a holiday dinner, welcome. Many of us have worked hard to provide those things for you. It's Easter.

But for those of you who are here because shadows of your own Good Friday just won't let go of you; for those who keep searching and can't seem to find a balm for the soul; for those who can never seem to escape the jackhammers that shake your life's foundations; for those who, Easter after Easter, keep hoping that just once some light might shine for you—you are the reason I am still in ministry—30 years, now, and counting.

You are the reason that on Friday I didn't just throw in the towel and retire to a quiet place in the woods to preserve what little is left of my sanity. For you and for myself, I had to get past Friday's trauma and find Easter, weeping with Mary in the quiet dark among the dead.

When Mary came to the tomb in an attempt to ease her pain, it got worse. Things were not as they should have been. The stone had been rolled away. What new horror was this? Tomb robbing was a thing in the early first century—enough so that Caesar had to write an edict against it. Or maybe it was a trap set by the authorities to grab and arrest Jesus' followers who might come to mourn him. She didn't look inside, and likely it was too dark to see even if she had. Anything or anyone might be in there, so she ran to get Peter and John.

The three of them then ran back together; and Peter and John take turns looking and then crawling through the small opening into the tomb. We're told that, when John went in, he "saw and believed." But then it goes on to say that they didn't yet understand the Scripture about Jesus rising from the dead.

So, likely the only thing John "believed" at that point was what his own eyes told him. Jesus' body had been there, and the linens that wrapped his body, heavy with aloe and myrrh, still lay on the slab where the body had been. But the body itself was AWOL. Peter looked; John looked; and they both went all the way in to be sure; but it simply was not there.

And then, get this, Peter and John go home. I can imagine Mary's mouth just hanging open. You're...going home? That's it? This whole business is fine with you? It's not fine with Mary, and she does not go home. Instead, she stays in the garden and weeps. But this is not the ritual lament. There's a different word for that and to do the ritual, she would have gone into the tomb and sat on the slab near the body or on the floor. But now there was no body to lament.

Mary is crying her own tears of grief and now frustration that she can't even have the most basic consolation of being with Jesus' body and giving him the final dignity of her lament. But, since Peter and John didn't find any tomb robbers, soldiers, or wild animals inside, Mary finally bends down to look for herself, still weeping as she does so because she knows what the men saw.

But when Mary looks, she sees more than they did. Now there are two angels on either end of the horizontal slab where Jesus body had been laid. Biblically, angels are an indicator of who is important in the story, and it's Mary, not Peter and John, who gets angels.

Although the word "angel" means messenger, these angels don't bring Mary a message, they ask a question, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And there we hear what is on Mary's heart: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." And in the next couple of lines, we learn a lot about Mary.

First, she answers the angels' question but then she turns around. Almost every place in the Bible where angels appear, including in the resurrection narratives in other gospels, the angels have to start whatever they're about to say with some version of "Fear not."

Mary looks in the tomb and sees two angels. She doesn't bat an eye. She doesn't even stick around to see if they have anything else interesting to say. She is on a mission to find Jesus' body and if the angels aren't going to help her with that, she has no use for them. She just turns around.

When she turns her back on the angels, there is a live person asking her the exact same question. "Woman, why are you weeping?" and then he adds one more, "For whom are you looking?"

Since this is at least a live person hanging out in the garden, she answers his question by assuming he's the gardener and must have been the person who took the body. After all, the tomb did belong to someone else. It belonged to the wealthy and well-connected Joseph of Arimathea, who had to convince Pilate to give him Jesus' body. Maybe that permission was rescinded. Maybe it was only for the length of the Sabbath. Who knows? She says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Think about that for a minute. Mary is not there with a cart or a horse or even another person. I get the sense that if the man actually were the gardener and he'd said, "This was not his tomb. The soldiers came and took his body to Caiaphas" that she would have marched straight up those stone steps to the house of the high priest that we talked about last week, hoisted Jesus' body on her back, and taken him wherever she wanted right from under the high priest's nose. "Yeah, kill me if you want, but so long as I live, you can't have him! I'll go bury him myself. Somewhere."

Mary is a woman of inner and outer strength. It makes me wonder if Paul was thinking of the inner fire of Mary Magdalene when he wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Maybe it was Mary Magdalene who convinced him.

Back in the garden, it kind of sounds like Mary was starting to turn her back on the gardener, too, because it says she turns again when the gardener speaks her name, "Mary." It's in the speaking of her name that she recognizes that the man she thought was the gardener is actually Jesus. And she responds to him in perhaps the most relief-filled cry ever uttered, "Rabbouni."

And then comes the line that scholars of John all worry about. As you might expect from someone who has just found out their loved one is back from the dead, Mary apparently at least reaches out for him. She might actually have already grabbed onto him when he says, "Do not hold on to me," since the word for "hold on" here implies an intentional, sustained, and even intimate touch. It's used most frequently in the Bible when Jesus touches people to heal them.

Dr. Raymond Brown, perhaps the most respected scholar on the gospel of John from the 20th century, says there are at least 12 different interpretations of why Jesus tells Mary not to hold onto him. And, who knows. This is John so it could well mean all twelve of those things and then some. John always speaks in layers. But Dr. Brown also points out that this story is odd and unique enough that it likely represents a tradition that is much, much older than the gospel itself, and is therefore, much more likely to be historical rather than symbolic.

So, it's possible that even here in John, we could simply let the text speak and hear the rest of what Jesus says to Mary. His full statement to her is, "Do not hold on to me, for 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.'" This is...different. In every other gospel, the message from the angel at the tomb is for the women to

go tell the men that Jesus has risen from the dead, and usually to add that he's already on his way north to Galilee and will meet them there.

But here, Mary is given a totally different message. It's all about Jesus' ascension, and it sounds like Jesus appears to her in the middle of it. In the other gospels, Jesus' ascension into heaven is a separate event. Luke puts it over a month out after his resurrection. But in John, Jesus' ascension and resurrection are pretty much one and the same thing.

In John, Jesus spends long chapters—after Thursday's last supper and before his arrest later that night—talking about how he will be leaving his disciples but they shouldn't be worried because once he is gone, the Holy Spirit will come and that's when the disciples will really be able to come into their own. That's the message of pretty much all of John 14, which takes place right after Thursday's dinner and is one of the standard funeral texts across all denominations. It's the, "In my Father's house are many mansions," chapter.

Here's John 14:15-21, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask God, and God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in God, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by God, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'"

Everything Jesus says to Mary and everything that happens to her in the garden is an echo of what Jesus said to the disciples that night after dinner.

Here's more of it: John 14:25-29

'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

You heard me say to you, "I am going away, and I am coming to you." If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to God, because God is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe."

Mary's message to Jesus' other disciples is basically—uh, it has occurred. What he said would happen that night after dinner has now happened. He is ascending, which means God's Holy Spirit is descending. And it does.

Right after Mary Magdalene tells the disciples that she has seen Jesus and tells them what he has said...that same night, Easter night, Jesus appears to all the disciples who were gathered, and in an echo of John 14:27, Jesus says in John 20:21, "Peace be with you. As God has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost all on the same day. I like efficient saviors.

At the end of John 13, Jesus has told his disciples that he's going someplace they can't come—at least not right away, and Peter gets upset. That's why chapter 14 begins with the words, "Let not your hearts be troubled." Jesus may as well have said, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Don't hold on to me; God has much greater things in store for you. If you let my body go, I can ascend; and the spirit you love so much in me can return to be within you forever. And then, Woman, look out. You will be a force. Now go, tell the others.

Mary shouldn't hold on to Jesus for the same reasons his male disciples shouldn't hang onto him. Jesus needs to ascend; he needs to go where they can't come; his work needs to multiply by becoming their work. "As God has sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit."

Jesus could have given that message to either John or Peter as they jockeyed for who would reach the tomb first. But Jesus chose the one who actually arrived first and the one who refused to leave until she found what she was seeking—kind of like a shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to go search for the one that is lost.

And when he told her to let go and bring the message to the other disciples, she did just that. For that act, the Church has named her "The Apostle to the Apostles," and in 2016 Pope Francis gave her a major feast day, on June 22, making her the only woman to be put on par with the other apostles.

By the time I wrote those words, it was late on Friday and Mischief had made it clear that any further activity, whether work or leisure, would be impossible. So, I gave up and went to bed. Saturday was supposed to be sunny and I prayed that the road crew would not be working. I downloaded a nature sounds app to my phone, which was soothing to me but freaked out Mischief. So I shut it off, went to sleep, and hoped for a better tomorrow when there would be quiet and I could find my way to the point of the sermon, and polish it.

As usual, Mischief woke me up with his whining at 6 am. But, no signs of the work crew prepping to ruin my day, and no clouds I could detect. And then, about 7:45, I heard them. The bane of my existence, leaf blowers. Across the street. I was sobbing again by 8:30. I thought either God really and truly hates me or the devil really doesn't want me to say anything coherent at all on the most important Sunday of the year.

With concentration out of the question, I went to finish all the rest of the pieces of the service, including finding something to use for the pastoral prayer after our joys and concerns. My mind was blank. So, I went to see what I had used on Easter last year, and there was a prayer by Leslie Weatherhead.

Rev. Weatherhead was a British Methodist theologian in the 20th century and was noted for his books and his preaching at the City Temple in London, a building that was, during his tenure, gutted by fire from incendiary bombs during World War II. Where one scholar called him "unrivalled as a twentieth-century physician of souls" another called him "an arch-apostate, whose place was in hell." And I thought, "You know, I like that in a person."

I can't speak to his arch-apostate status, but when I re-read his prayer, I could feel across the almost 50 years since his passing, his ability to be a physician of souls. And I realized that this year the pastoral prayer was not the prayer from the pastor, but the prayer for the pastor, coming into a new millennium from someone whose church had literally been bombed in war.

I've thankfully never heard an actual bomb, but I'm guessing that the noise from the bombing of London then, or of Ukraine now, is way worse than the plague of iron machinery tearing up a road or even the hellion leaf-blowers that contaminate the neighborhood. And I imagine that having incendiary fire from bombs gut your church can make it pretty hard to preach on Sunday.

So, I'm going to close this sermon with his prayer because I think the heart of this prayer was the heart of the message that Jesus entrusted to Mary Magdalene, his most devoted disciple, who stood weeping in the garden beside his tomb, determined to turn her back even on angels if they wouldn't help her find the one thing she truly needed.

And the message she brought, not from angels but straight from the lips of Jesus to the rest of the disciples, was the same as the message in John 14, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me." And that message that Mary was given and that she faithfully carried to the other disciples, is the same message they were then charged to bring to the world, empowered by the Spirit, which could only be let loose when Mary and the disciples stopped hanging on to a human Jesus, and let the Holy Spirit fly.

Weatherhead's prayer is, I think, the message for those of you who are here this Easter morning, as I am, truly looking for the great physician of souls. If Easter doesn't mean this, then it means nothing. And, I will note, that once I found the prayer, the leaf blowers fell silent. Here it is:

O God, by whose power Christ was raised from the dead,
so that the worst that men could do had no dominion over him,
lay your hand in loving tenderness on all who need this message most.

Because the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost,
we pray –

For those who have lost their dear ones and whose hearts are sad;
For those who have lost their health and vitality;
For those who have lost their youth;
For those who have lost their livelihood;
For those who have lost opportunities;
For those who have lost patience;
For those who have lost their faith;
For all, we pray, who are wounded in the battle of life
and are nigh unto despair.

Give us all such a vision of Christ's risen glory
that we, too, may trust his power.
that we, too, may know nothing can separate us
from your loving purposes or finally defeat your will.

So may we rise up from all our distress and despair and take heart again;
walk with Christ the companion of our souls,
so whatever lies in store for us,
to find at last that faith has its own reward,
that we have not missed our way,
that the Son of Man came to seek and to save
that which seemed lost forever,

Amen