

NOTHING TO HOLD ONTO
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008
Scripture: John 20: 1-18

“Life changes fast,” writes Joan Didion in a memorandum about her husband John Dunne’s sudden death at the dinner table on December 30, 2003. “Life changes in the instant.” she says, “You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.”¹

In the book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion remembers as many of the details as she can of what happened to her that year that followed her husband’s death. How it unfolded and who was involved. Again and again, her thoughts return to the table that night on December 30, 2003 as she remembers that somewhere in the middle of a sentence about the effect of World War I, or was it a question about single malt whiskey, John Dunne raised his left hand and slumped motionless at the dinner table.

In that instant life changed. By the time they arrived at New York Hospital only six blocks and a few minutes away, he was already gone.

Sometimes it comes like that. Sometimes it comes like it did on September 11th, with days passing and no word from those who are missing, and too much reality facing you amid the billowing clouds of ash and dust, so much so that you scarce can take in all that has happened, not to mention accept it.

Sometimes it comes after a long illness and you’ve had time to prepare and adjust somewhat and think that you are getting ready, and you are, and then it comes and you’re not ready.

Death is a sneak thief. He picks the locks and comes down the hall while we are asleep and silently takes grandma. He yanks the car off the road on the icy curve and crushes the driver’s side of the car of the teenager coming home from the dance. He quietly builds plaque in the arteries over years, and plots the stroke for some night when you least expect it at the dinner table, while talking about single malt whiskey or the effects of World War I.

“In the midst of life we are in death,” the minister says at the graveside, but none of us really wants to believe that. We are always *surprised* by death’s coming no matter how expected. Like some guest who rings the doorbell just as you are sitting down for a family meal and who comes in and takes a place at the table no matter how unwelcome.

One thing is for sure, when death comes, everybody tries to hold on for dear life... to memories, to sanity, to hope, to each day. You try to hold on so that you can make it through the loss. You sift through the clothes and remember that this is the dress she wore the night of her 70th birthday party.

Or you look at the unused opera tickets and think of what you might have been doing had there not been that unexpected turn of affairs.

You pick up the sweater in the closet and it still has the scent of his cologne.

You sit in the living room with a Beethoven Sonata playing in the background and remember all the nights you entertained, and the guests had left, and the dishes were done, and you sat there in the dim light and talked into the late hours about nothing in particular with a Beethoven Sonata playing in the background, and the fire winding down in the fireplace. But now, no more!

We hang on to whatever we can hang onto, because no matter when or how it comes, death leaves us empty handed.

Nobody knew this any better than did Mary Magdalene that early Sunday morning when she set out for the tomb. In John's version of the story, unlike Matthew's and Mark's and Luke's, she is carrying no spices or oils for anointing.

The way John tells it, the spices and ointments were laid on the body of Jesus Friday afternoon, after the cross. They were wrapped with him in his shroud when he was laid in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb.

She doesn't even have any flowers in her hands, she is so grief stricken. Her mind is preoccupied by her loss. And she is alone there in the garden as the dawn begins to break. None of the other women, according to John, are with her. She is all alone.

John does tell us that it was still dark when she first arrived, both a description of the hour before the dawn comes, and also a description of the sense of emptiness and grief that she bore.

But suddenly the darkness of the morning is broken by the unexpected sight of the tomb gaping and the stone rolled away. She didn't even bother to look inside.

Mary just turned and ran to get Peter and John and bring them back to help her, to look inside and see what happened. When they arrived with her at the tomb, by what was now the light of dawn, they saw what she had seen from a distance, and bending inside the opening of the cave, Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw the grave clothes folded and laid aside.

First Peter and then John looked into the dark hole, and John believed what he saw, even though he did not yet have a full understanding, because neither he nor Peter had yet seen the risen Lord; not yet.

"They returned home," John says, almost anticlimactically. As if nothing had happened. As if the world itself had not been turned upside down. But Mary, Mary lingered in the garden weeping, lost in her thoughts, unsure of what to do next.

In the midst of her tears, two angels appear to her and ask why she is crying. And this may not seem so strange to those who have lost loved ones. For at such a time as that, many experience that thin place between heaven and earth, where the things of heaven and the things of earth touch, and the veil that separates the two is most porous. It is, ironically, one of the reassuring graces of grief. Those of you who have experienced it will understand that of which I am speaking.

Mary answers the angels that her Lord's body has been stolen and she does not know where they have laid him. And precisely at that point, he whose presence she longs to recover, appears and stands beside her. He asks her why she is weeping, and

she, thinking he was the gardener, said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take his body.”²

To which Jesus calls Mary by name, “Mary;” and she, recognizing him, calls out to him, “Rabbouni,” which means “Teacher.”

Just at that moment Mary must have been reaching out to him, reaching at his feet, fearful and uncertain and yet believing all at the same time. She had to get a hold of him to touch him, to reassure herself that he was not gone from her. There he was, standing before her, and she had thought he was the gardener!

...Now of all the things that Jesus might have said as she reached out to him, all the things he might have communicated, the one thing he did say was, “Do not hold on to me!”

They could have embraced. They might have thrown themselves into each other’s arms and kissed and held on for dear life to each other. They might have at least “Passed the peace.” But no Jesus said as Mary reached out to grab a hold of him, “Do not hold onto me.”

And how strange that sounds... that the odd and quite unexpected news of Easter is that there’s nothing, really, to hold onto. Which may be part of why it is so hard to get a grip on Easter. Because there’s so little to grip. No body, no corpse, nothing to touch. In fact Easter, is as much defined by what is *not* there as by what *is*. Bodies don’t just disappear, after all. And if all there is to hold onto are some linen cloths, stained with blood, well, is that something you would want to put in a box with sachet and keep under the bed or in the closet?

It would be nice if there were something to hold. The Christian church has tried holding onto a lot of things over the years. The whole idea of relics, so disliked by the Protestant reformers, was just such a practice of trying to hold onto something with spiritual power and energy.

It had its heyday in the fifth through the sixteenth centuries. In the Cathedral Church of Amiens, for instance, they have preserved the skull of John the Baptist. It’s got a dent in it, in fact. They say the skull was fractured when Herod’s wife stuck a knife into the skull to pick it up from the platter. Which makes for a gory legend, but one the kids might like, especially seventh grade boys.

The church of San Croce in Rome holds the finger of doubting Thomas, the one that supposedly was used to touch the body of the risen Lord, though if you read the gospel closely, John doesn’t say that Thomas actually touched the risen Lord at all, only that he was invited to do so.

And we all know about the Shroud of Turin, which has pretty much been discredited now, but everybody still reveres as Jesus’ shroud.

The Christian church has gone to some extremes to hold onto these relics, because, like Mary, we don’t let go easily.

I once had a graveside service in a cemetery in Connecticut where a particularly emotional mourner in the family threw herself on her father’s casket already lowered into the grave, much to the shock of all of us standing around. She called to her father

in the casket and begged the funeral director to have them just close the earth over her, she could not live without him, she said. “I can’t live without him. I’ll stay here forever.” And who could blame her? Even if there was nothing of her father left to hold onto except his casket.

Mary, of course, wanted Jesus back just the way he was. Which is probably why she called him “Rabbouni,” teacher, the familiar name by which she knew him. It was the role he had in relationship to her during his earthly life, teaching the disciples, including Mary, to observe all that he had taught them.

She wanted him back in a familiar role. Back working miracles and drawing crowds on hillsides, multiplying loaves and fishes, restoring the legs of the lame and the eyes of the blind, calling forth, as he did, a little girl from the dead, and later in Bethany, Lazarus from the grave.

She wanted him back walking among them on the dusty trails of Galilee, so that she could relive the way she thought of him and how she held onto him there, except of course, that this time she would really pay attention because he would have the imprimatur of having risen from the dead.

As my friend Ted Wardlaw President of Austin Seminary says so rightly of Mary’s reaction, “What Mary wants is for Easter to validate the past, because that is something familiar – something she can hold onto.”³

And of course, the fact of the matter is that that is part of what Easter is all about, but only part of what it is about. Easter is the validation not just of the past that Jesus lived, but also of the promises that he has made about the future. He promised that there would be a realm yet to come that would be as big as God, a house with many rooms prepared for us.

He showed us the way to live a life exceeding the righteousness of the law, not just the letter of it. So he healed on the Sabbath, cleansed lepers by anointing them, and touched the dead, bringing them to life whom no righteous man was ever permitted to touch.

He exceeded the written law with the unwritten law, the law of God’s Love. And he lived into the promise of a time to come, where all God’s people dwell together in unity and in peace, seated at the table of the heavenly banquet where enemies have become friends, and outcasts are welcome, and no one is kept out.

That’s the one who stands in the garden and meets Mary on Easter morning, not the gardener, but the one who, in rising from the dead, has not only validated all that is past, but also all that is promised.

The hard lesson that any of us who grieve, which is all of us at some time or another, must come to accept is that we cannot go back and have the ones we love the way they were. We cannot hold onto them in the way that we most long to hold onto them. If we are to go on living, that is part of what we must accept so that we live not just in the past but also live into the promises as well.

“Do not hold onto me,” Jesus says to Mary when she calls him by the name she used to call him, “Rabbouni.” He corrects her as he also corrects us, “Do not hold onto

me,” he says. He’s not on his way back to the past. He’s on his way to God, and he’s taking the whole blessed world with him.

What Easter reminds us is that the past is folded into the future in Christ, and all that has been is prelude to all that will be, so that in the end nothing is lost, but all is gain, and that’s what we can hold onto, the promise that at the end he will meet us on our way.

What we can do is run as Mary does from here telling everyone that will listen that we too have heard and seen something wonderful, something exceeding our expectation, sometime utterly unanticipated. We have seen the promise of the future assured in Jesus’ resurrection.

We can show by the way we live our lives that we have set our hearts on a promise that, even as things in the world are coming apart, other things by the grace of God, are coming together. That in the midst of economic downturns, and the marking of five years of war, and terrorists afoot, and 4000 military deaths and countless civilians perished; in a time when cranes snap in the passing of a Saturday afternoon and seven lives are lost, there is, nonetheless, hope greater than our despair, courage stronger than our fear, joy sweeter than our tears, and a power to eternal life that trumps all death.

The only thing we cannot do,” as Barbara Brown Taylor has put it, “is hold on to him. He has asked us please not to 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.⁴

Good news today. We have not seen the last of him, nor of those we love, nor of a new world that is coming into being, a world of God’s making where there is neither sorrowing nor sighing any more and every tear has been wiped away.

Here is a truth that is better than we expected, and more than we yet understand, the affirmation on which all our hopes are founded, “The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia.”

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¹ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005) p. 3

² My paraphrase.

³ Theodore J. Wardlaw, paper for the Moveable Feast, 2008. I have borrowed liberally in this latter section of the sermon from Wardlaw’s exposition of this text.

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Unnatural Truth,” *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999) 112.