

An Expansive Life

We might not be here if it weren't for the women. That's right. We might not even be sitting in this room, thousands of miles away from Jerusalem, if Mary had not shown up. Had she not been willing to follow the mournful customs of preparing the body of the newly dead with spices and ointments, who knows when the rest of Jesus' followers would have found out that he was no longer in the tomb.

Jesus' body had not been stolen. He was simply not there. Who knows if the disciples would have believed what they had seen if they first had not heard from Mary that his body was gone from where it had been laid. Were it not for Mary, would the men have been able to believe? Would we even be here?

As scholars remind us, even in this country within the last 100 years, women of all races and men who were not white were not considered credible witnesses in court cases. It was only in 1975 that women were allowed to serve on juries in all 50 states.

To this day, when people on the margins offer witness, when women, people of color, children, people with histories of addiction, mental illness or incarceration, LGBTQIA siblings, Native Americans tell true stories that run counter to the commonly accepted narrative, people often don't believe them.

The disciples weren't immune to this societal pattern. Even though the men know that Jesus was capable of great miracles, even though they had watched him defeat death and illness and poverty time and again, even though they had seen Jesus repeatedly do the impossible, when the men heard Mary tell a story that ran counter to what they deemed possible, most of them didn't believe her. In fact, scripture tells us that they considered the testimony of the women to be an idle tale, what one scholar says would be comparable to the wild, exaggerated speech of someone who was delirious, or, put even more simply, hysterical nonsense.

But today, I want to focus on Mary's interaction with Jesus and how that has been interpreted by men in a certain way and how I would like us to consider it a different way today.

Mary gets a bad rap for being a prostitute though there is no evidence in scripture that she ever was. Some scholars say she was an older woman who helped fund Jesus' ministry. But that doesn't stop some theologians from still bashing her.

In our scripture this morning, Mary is overwhelmed with grief so that she doesn't recognize Jesus when he first speaks with her. And then he famously says to Mary, Do

not hold on to me. The meaning of this phrase has been debated for centuries. Older English translations read, “Don’t touch me,” but the Greek word Haptou is more likely referring to an active touching. Which is weird because later on Jesus asks Thomas to touch his wounds, right?

Some interpreters have assumed Jesus permits Thomas to touch him while prohibiting Mary’s touch because Thomas is favored in some way. Others has popularized sexist interpretations of the instruction. “Do not hold onto me” as a reprimand against Mary Magdalene.

Theologian Ambrose, in the early 300s said Mary couldn’t touch Jesus because she didn’t recognize Jesus’ heavenly state. Jerome attributed Mary’s unworthiness to her lack of belief in the divinity of Jesus. Augustine followed suit.

What is Jesus trying to teach Mary Magalene in that moment? Mary might be a symbolic stand in for the Christian community. Mary Magdalene is weeping for the missing body of Jesus and Jesus appears in her state of mourning. But this Jesus is not the same as before. After all, Mary mistakes him for the gardener.

The risen Christ is not the familiar friend that was lost at the crucifixion. As Marianne Meye Thompson clarifies in her commentary on John, “What happened to Jesus is not identical with what happened to Lazarus: Lazarus was raised to life again. Jesus was raised to life anew.”

The resurrection is not a resuscitation of a dead body. It is the birth of a new kind of body. Jesus is telling Mary to let go of the body she’s grasping to keep with her, because that body is gone. The revelation of God in the flesh of Jesus has come to an end, but God becomes further enfleshed beyond Jesus’ body. The resurrection and ascension is an expansion of the incarnation into the world.

Jesus says, “Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, I am ascending to my Abba God and your Abba God. That phrase “My Abba God and Your Abba God” is deliberate. This is the first time in John’s gospel that we see the phrase “Your Abba God” after Jesus refers to God as Abba God, or Father God, or Mother God, or Creator God throughout the Gospel. This is also the first instance in John’s gospel where Jesus refers to the disciples as brothers and sisters. Jesus is showing that God’s incarnation continues through all of us as siblings of Jesus.

What if we imagine that instead of Jesus moving away from Mary as she moves toward him, what if we imagine Jesus and Mary moving toward each other? After all, Jesus waits for Peter and John to leave before appearing to Mary. Jesus chooses her to be the

first witness to the resurrection. And in this conversation between them, she also becomes the first witness to the meaning of the resurrection. The instruction “do not hold onto me” is a positive reorientation that confirms where we can find Christ after the resurrection.

Feminist theologian Sandra Schneiders elaborates on this meaning by paraphrasing Jesus’ teaching to Mary as “It is no longer in and through my physical or earthly historical individuality that you can continue to relate to me. Rather, go to the community, the new focus of my earthly presence.”

At the end of this liturgical season of Lent and at the beginning of this season of Easter, consider what you may be holding onto and what you must let go of so that you may recognize the risen Christ anew. Feel it on your skin. Clench your muscles and let go. Open your grasp to what’s to come.

During the second year of this pandemic, we are very familiar with needing to avoid physical touch as Mary does in this story. And it’s been heartbreaking for a lot of us over the last couple of years.

Like Mary we all have experienced an unfortunate interruption of the intimacy we desire with one another. We’ve been trying to figure out how to maintain relationships because we desire to remain intimate in any way possible. We say, “Do not touch. Do not hold on. But please, let’s find another way because I still desire your connection!” I imagine Jesus having similar feelings here. He wants Mary’s touch, but now she must find another way, because the old way has been interrupted.

Many of us desire a post-pandemic world where we could return “back to normal” but we’ve slowly learned that returning to how things used to be is impossible. We cannot hold on to what was. Reality of old is dead and gone. Jesus calls us to let go and go forth in search of something new.

Jesus’ instruction to not hold onto him is a call for creativity, to imagine new ways of engaging with Christ in Christ’s new spiritual form beyond the individual Jesus.

We now seek to touch the risen Christ through each other; through nature and through life itself. The incarnation continues to expand moment by moment. On Easter, we are all asked by the Risen Christ, “Who are you looking for?” and we’re instructed, “Do not hold on to me. Go to my siblings. Look for me there.”

Take a moment right now to look around and you will see the risen Christ in each other. Christ is here, just in a different form. Christ is here in this community of faith and

Christ is out these doors wanting to be connected to us as well. We can't hold on to the old way of how we thought about Jesus. That Jesus is gone and a new form of Christ has arrived. That is what we celebrate this morning.

I want to close with a poem by Rev. Sarah Speed entitled "New Life is Right Here."

Maybe today
we can take a moment.
Maybe today
we can silence the inner critic.
Maybe today
we can leave perfection at the door.
Maybe today we can allow ourselves to be
here.

Maybe that's all that matters.
Maybe this sunrise is for us.
Maybe these Hallelujahs are for us.
Maybe the hope blooming in my chest
is for us.

Maybe the resurrection was not just about God's body
but is about our body.
Maybe this new life reaching all the way to the edges.
Maybe we are free to live in a new way
where love is the currency and we are enough.

Maybe that's what this is all about –
not a relentless pursuit of more
But God's relentless pursuit of me.

New life
is right here.
Like the women – say it out loud.
Like Peter – run that way. Amen.