



March 27, 2005  
Easter

John 20:1, 11-18  
**Letting Go of Jesus**  
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Earlier this week, Mary Magdalene and a few other women saw Jesus die on a cross. They had hoped he was the Messiah. But earlier this week their hope turned to grief.

Earlier this week, an older couple received a phone call from their son, out West. He said he was sorry, but he wouldn't be able to come for the holidays after all. "By the way, the grandkids say hi." They tell him, of course they understand. They hang up the phone but the old couple don't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week, a woman was called into her supervisor's office. He tried to explain about the tough local economy and the need to downsize. He was sorry. So she cleans out her desk, she packs away her hopes of getting ahead, and she wonders what she will tell her kids.

Earlier this week someone received bad test results from a physician. Someone else buried an old lover. Earlier this week someone's hope was crucified. Maybe yours. If wasn't last Friday, then it was a previous dark day or a dark day to come. Sooner or later we all lose whatever it is we're counting on. According to the gospels, even Jesus will die on you. Or at least the Jesus you know will die.

Mary Magdalene got up early this morning, before it was even light. But that is not hard if you have just spent another sleepless night in grief. The nights are always hardest. So Mary heads to the tomb where the dead body of Jesus lay. The Gospel of John doesn't tell us why Mary went to the tomb. The other gospels claim it was to anoint the dead body of Jesus. Perhaps it was also just easier to grieve in the cemetery. As she made her way down that dark road to the tomb, surely her mind must have drifted back to the better days they all had with Jesus in Galilee. Ah, Galilee. How far that seemed from this wretched place called Golgotha.

Back in the early days of Jesus' ministry, back in Galilee when he was popular, Mary developed some expectations of Jesus. I don't know what all those expectations were, but I do know that she didn't expect this. She didn't expect to be coming to his tomb. Since she called Jesus her "Rabboni" or rabbi, we also know that she expected to learn from Jesus her teacher. He was the one who explained God to her. Maybe she expected explanations to save her, but now Rabbi Jesus was dead and with him so were her expectations of him.

What about you? What have you expected of Jesus? Some of us, like Mary, think of Jesus as a teacher. "If you just follow the Christian prescripts," they say, "then you'll enjoy a good life." But what will you do the day an unexpected tragedy tears your good life apart? Or you may think of Jesus as a healer, a rescuer. He certainly did heal many people according to the New Testament.

He may even have healed you, or someone you love. But it is only a matter of time before one of your prayers for healing is not answered as you want. And what then?

Others of us prefer to think of Jesus as personal relationship. “It isn’t just his teaching or healing,” they claim, “it is his love that saves my life. And I am in love with him, too.” But one day you may realize that Jesus is more than your boyfriend, especially when you hear his call to turn the other cheek, love your enemy, and devote your life to places you would rather not go. Not even Jesus will always make it all about you.

Still others of us expect only to get social and political ideology from Jesus. It is interesting that both political liberals and conservatives will do this. In the sixties and seventies, it was the liberals who were baptizing their social programs with Jesus’ endorsement. For the last couple of decades the conservative agenda seems to have the copyright on Jesus’ name. But remember, it was the conservative Pharisees and liberal Sadducees who worked together in bilateral cooperation to kill Jesus. That was because they no longer found him politically useful and had finally started to realize how subversive Jesus was to the power structures.

Here’s the point: Like Mary and everyone else, you have a perspective on Jesus Christ. This idea of yours about Jesus involves more than just your opinion of Jesus of Nazareth. What it also reveals is the gospel truth about life as you know it. Your gospel is the story upon which you are building your life. It is your plan for finding salvation. The gospel for you may be all about loving Jesus, learning from him, or building a political agenda on Jesus. The gospel truth for you may be that Jesus isn’t involved in your life at all, and you’re on your own. We all have some story when it comes to Jesus, some plan or strategy, and that is the basis of our hope for salvation.

But what will you do when the hope falls apart, and when your gospel story starts to unravel? What will you do when the Jesus that you know comes to Good Friday? I know what you will do. You will do the same thing Mary Magdalene did. You will just stay by the tomb.

I am amazed by the power of our expectations of Jesus. It doesn’t matter how much of a beating they take, they just hang onto our souls. If you think Jesus helps those who help themselves, then you will just keep knocking yourself out in life, waiting for a sacred boost that never comes. If you think Jesus is going to protect you and your loved ones from evil, then you will just keep waiting for Superman to save the day, no matter how many times you get clobbered. If you think Jesus isn’t going to do a blessed thing for you, then it doesn’t matter how much he does give you, you will still complain because you have already chosen to believe that Jesus is uninvolved. (We don’t actually believe what we see. We see what we have already chosen to believe.) If you think Jesus is going to give you your dreams, then you will insist on waiting for them, even when he is trying to give you God’s dreams.

Even when the Jesus we know is dead, like Mary, we remain doggedly devoted. We just keep living out of a story that isn’t working. But what if, one day, Easter broke through to you and you discovered that there is more to Jesus than you know?

When Mary arrived at the tomb of Jesus, she found that it was empty. Her dead Jesus was missing. So she runs to tell Peter and John. They run to the tomb to see for themselves. Then, for

some reason, the men run home. Mary Magdalene, left alone at the empty tomb, starts to cry. It is striking that we are not told of her tears when Jesus died. The text doesn't depict Mary crying until her dead Jesus is missing. That is because we can handle a dead and failed strategy for salvation better than we can having no plan at all. Mary dissolves into tears because she is now in a state of anomie, confusion, inner chaos.

A man comes up behind her and asks, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Supposing that this man is the cemetery gardener she says, "They have taken him away. Do you know where he is? Tell me and I will take him back." The man just says, "Mary." Do you see? Even though we do not recognize the risen Jesus, he knows us and calls us by name as he reveals more of his salvation.

Mary exclaims, "Rabbi," and she reaches for Jesus. Now what happens next takes me by surprise. I was expecting a big teary embrace here. And then Jesus would say something like, "Gather up the boys. We're heading back to Galilee." But that is not what happens. What happened is that Jesus prevented Mary from grabbing him, and he told her, "Don't cling to me."

"Don't cling to me." Why does Jesus say that? Because it is what Easter says. Easter says, whatever it is that you are thinking about Jesus, it is not enough. When your expectations of his salvation are crucified, don't cling to them. Don't cling to a dead Jesus. He is not just your old Rabbi, your ticket to heaven, your work ethic, or your hope for a better tomorrow. He is not just your politics, your views on social justice, or your hopes for family. Those are all expectations, and like all expectations, they will eventually lead you to a tomb. But Jesus will not stay in a tomb.

He is the Resurrection and the Life. That cannot be managed! You cannot hold onto Jesus. You can only watch the surprising ways he grabs hold of you. There is more to Jesus than we know. And isn't that really all the hope we can handle from the Gospel?

Who would have thought it was the gardener all along? Jesus Christ is risen. There is no telling where or how he will appear again in his death-defying ministry of new life. All we know is that there is more than we know. Amen.