

John 20:1-18

(Huge props to Simon Woodman in London, who shared the link to his inspiring sermon on the Narrative Lectionary FB page, from which I've borrowed extensively)

<https://baptistbookworm.blogspot.com/2022/04/Noli%20me%20tangere.html?fbclid=IwAR3G-04pEp1DFz5FP7QjGeZf8Gh724lSt1FPFe8mwciuh24C4CjMTdfkUiQ>

Tom and I are deep into an eight-season Danish show on Amazon called "Seaside Hotel." It features gorgeous northern Danish scenery, beautiful food, and a cast of believable characters you can't help caring about. We've confessed to each other that we're haunted by the plot development and the characters, and find ourselves speculating about them every day. When it's over, we're going to feel sort of bereaved, knowing there is no more future for these characters.

Early Christians had the same kind of feeling about the characters in the gospels, especially of course Jesus. They created their own kind of fan fiction, which we see in the non-canonical gospels like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. The author of that book wanted to fill out the empty space where the story of Jesus' youth should be, and created a colorful narrative about a little boy who could miraculously give life to the clay doves he'd made, and zapped to a crisp a teacher who boxed his ears. According to the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, when Joseph accidentally cut a board too short, Jesus stepped up and miraculously lengthened it. It's stuff you're glad to know about, what a good boy he was to his dad and how childishly he exercised his divine power before he grew into it. This is what fan fiction does, it keeps the story and the characters going because we don't want to let go of them.

Clearly the early Christians who read those fan-fiction gospels knew the ending of the story. They were going back to it because they loved it, and they wanted more, even if the "more" turned out to be more about the author's desires than about the historical Jesus. And

actually we know that's the case with the canonical gospels like John, too. We know that John is telling us a theologized story, not reporting events on the ground—not only because he wasn't there, but also because he thinks the theologized story is going to help us understand better what happened than if he just reported "events on the ground." But once the ending of the story is known, any future re-reading of the story must take place in light of what is now known about the outcome.

Everyone who reads today's lection knows before we start how the story ends. We're not reading for that kind of information, and that's not why John wrote. This whole gospel, that we've been reading through since the start of the year, is a story that's been written for those who are *already* part of the next installment. And so we need to hear the account of Jesus' appearance to Mary from the perspective of those who already know the end of the story. The significance of this narrative isn't that Jesus is, in some way, still very much alive and with his disciples. Rather it is that the encounter with the risen Christ needs to go somewhere.

When Jesus first called his disciples in John's gospel, he asked them, "What are you looking for?" Now again, with Peter and the beloved disciple gone after a brief and unsatisfactory foray into the tomb, Jesus asks Mary, "For whom are you looking?" We become aware that Mary is at first unable to recognize Jesus because she isn't prepared to see him—we can only see what we're prepared to see. But notice this as well: Mary has lingered in the garden. She hasn't gone racing off again the way the two men had, who "believed but did not understand," a less than full-throated endorsement. She's just grieving, and probably could not even say why she stays, but she's not ready to go. The rabbis have said that the miracle of the burning bush was not the bush itself but that Moses stayed long enough to encounter God in it,

and so too with Mary. She doesn't know what she's staying for, she's just grieving, but the grieving opens up a miracle. When Jesus asks her "for whom are you looking," she answers, "for my Teacher," and Jesus moves her to the next level of understanding by speaking her name, "Mary."

Now. Let me pause to say something I love but isn't the point of my sermon. Sometimes we're like Mary in that we're making a choice without quite having a reason or a justification for it, and sometimes, if you're prone to overthinking things, you might ask yourself, "Is this right? Or should I have gone too? Or should I be more assertive and look around for someone to interrogate? Or should I have brought someone with me? Why did I come alone?" and all that overthinking kind of obscures the possibility that you're exactly where you should be. For whatever reason Mary stayed in the garden, it's good that she did. This story should remind us that often we're exactly where we should be, and what is unfolding for us is exactly what should unfold, and the world needs us to be present to it. For all the earth-shaking cosmic significance of the Resurrection, there is also this personal aspect, which is that where we are is exactly where Jesus was planning to meet us, and he knows our name, and whatever we thought we expected, we recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.

But I digress. What I really wanted to say was that Mary in the story can't possibly take in what it means that Jesus has been resurrected, and so she of course reverts to past experience and tries to embrace him. He prevents her, even though a few verses later he's going to be cheerfully inviting Thomas to stick his fingers in his wounds. Jesus preventing Mary from embracing him is a way of saying that she (and everyone) had to move from, if you will, a relationship with the historical Jesus, and to embrace the new experience of the resurrected

Christ that will be found in lived encounter with the Spirit of Christ. She will not go back to the time before the resurrection; that story is over.

At the time of John's gospel, Christians would not encounter Jesus on the road or in the synagogue or at the table, as the disciples had. Instead, they would encounter him in the breaking of the bread, in the rising from the waters of baptism, in the miracle of food freely shared. Simon Woodman says, and I agree, that contemporary Christians are not quite sure what to do with the resurrection. We certainly get the crucifixion; that's all too easy. But we've almost relegated the resurrection to a divine publicity stunt, sort of a cosmic proof of how much better our God is than everyone else's. Woodman says,

**The resurrection needs to be more
than a cosmic publicity stunt which validates the cross.
It needs to become an invitation to a new way of living,
a gateway to a new way of being.**

And a key to this is to be found in the way Mary relates to Jesus.

Did you notice what Mary called Jesus as she tried to cling onto him?

She called him 'Rabbouni', which John tells us is Hebrew for 'Teacher'.

Mary was still stuck in the role of student, to Jesus' role of teacher.

She was a disciple, and he her master.

Jesus counters this by re-writing the script, by changing the language.

In the post-resurrection encounter with Christ,

those who would be his disciples

find that he is no longer their master, but their brother.

In the new world that comes into being in the resurrection, Jesus moves from Master to brother, from Lord to friend. Christ is no longer an intermediary between us and the divine, but God with us, present by the Spirit.

And yet we want to cling to the Jesus of history. We want the master who will teach us and tell us what to do, sit in judgment on our enemies, and defend us against the unfaithful.

But if we are to learn from Mary's story, to have Jesus with us, we have to let go of the pocket authority to which we sometimes reduce the Jesus on the page.

When Mary is held off from embracing her old teacher, it means that the story Jesus began has not ended, the way the New Testament canon has closed. It means the revelations are not over—Mary witnesses to a resurrection faith, not to a code of teachings and fine examples given in the past glory days when Jesus walked the earth. We know how the story ends; we always begin our reading of it with full knowledge of how the whole thing unspools. But the resurrection calls us to *read into being* the ongoing stories of our own lives in the presence of the resurrected Christ in our midst.

We are going to meet the risen Christ in ways that we do not yet know, and are not prepared for, and very possibly will not recognize right away. These meetings will not be carbon copies of the stories in the Bible. But knowing the truth of the resurrection, I think we should consider the possibility that we *are* exactly where the world needs us to be, and that the risen Christ will recognize us even when we don't recognize him, and the kingdom will unfold with kindness, with graciousness, with promise.

Loving God, with joy and unending praise we raise our voices to you, as together we sing, "Hallelujah! Jesus is risen!" Amen.