

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
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THE GLASS CASTLE AND THE GARDEN

Jennifer Senior's Pulitzer Prize winning essay *On Grief* is a moving meditation on the nature of grief and how we can move on—or not—after tragedy. The essay concerns the last diary of 26-year old Bobby McIlvaine who died in the twin towers on 9/11. At some point his father gave this last diary to Bobby's girlfriend, and this upset his mother. "How can you give away the last thing our son ever wrote?" she asked. For her the diary was the chance to hear her son's voice one more time, to somehow still be in conversation with her son, who was a good writer and had a lively mind. Yet despite her initial upset about the diary, the mother came to understand that she had to let go of her grief if she wanted anything resembling a normal life. But her husband, Bobby's father—not so much. Even now, more than 20 years on, he wants to hold on to his grief—living in, as the author said in a recent interview, a glass castle of sorrow. He wants to stay there. So he does.

Did you notice that poignant verse which says "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb"? She's doing the most natural thing in the world: going to be near the grave of a loved one who's recently died. It's an experience all of us can relate to. And all of us know how easy it is to get stuck in that glass castle of sorrow. To be fair, Mary's grief—her sorrow—is still very raw and she seems to be in some kind fugue state. She isn't seeing clearly. Only when she hears Jesus' familiar voice calling her by name does the fog of confusion and grief lift.

In light of this, Jesus saying to Mary, "Do not hold on to me" seems particularly perverse. I don't know about you, but if someone I loved deeply came back from death all I'd want to do is to hang on to him—and for dear life, too. But no: it's "Do not hold on to me." The odd thing is Mary *doesn't* hold to him. She leaves Jesus and runs off to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord." You'd have thought she'd try to bring him along with her. Except he'd given that strange command "Do not hold on to me," so I guess bringing him along wasn't in the cards.

But did you also notice Jesus said this puzzling thing after he'd called her by name and she in turn had called him, if not by name, then at least by what you might call a term of endearment: rabbouni. And I have to wonder if it's her calling him that which made Jesus say "Do not hold on to me." After all, his teaching days were over. He was going in a different direction and couldn't be held back.

Who knows what happened in the garden all those Easters ago? And in a way, who cares? We're not here to commemorate an historical event, nor are we here to work

our way into believing an otherworldly metaphysic. We're here to learn anew that the truth of this resurrection story is found in learning how to let go and I think what this mysterious resurrection story is telling us is that if we want to know something of Christ's resurrection power in our own lives, we need to let the past be past—something very few of us are good at. I'd go so far to say that most of don't do it at all, hanging on as we do for dear life even to things that are dead—or are killing us.

Years ago, I spoke with a woman who asked me to perform an exorcism on her dead husband's ashes. He'd been gone for many years and apparently had been rather abusive. She was convinced that all of the negative things in her life—and there *were* many—were because these ashes were haunted. I suggested that perhaps the problem was that she hadn't let go of all of the toxicity and negativity of her marriage and that somehow keeping the ashes around was a way of blaming the past on all of her present problems. But she would have none of that and so she left and I never met her again. I wonder if she's still in that glass castle of sorrow haunted as much by anything as her refusal to take hold of life and move out—and move on.

Do not hold on to me. Live your life—your real life, mind you, not the half-lives you cling to. We don't need to stay in the bad place for ever. Outside the glass castle there's the garden of new Easter life but we can't go there because in the fugue state of our daily lives we can't even see that it's possible to go there. But sometimes, by grace, we hear the risen One who's always lurking in the doorway between the glass castle and the garden, between the tomb of the past and promise of the future, calling us by name and setting us free.

"I have seen the Lord," Mary said. Have you? Have I? I don't know. But this I do know: He's not seen in the past, in the familiar—even in grief. He's seen in those who have had the courage to let go, for letting-go is the most God-like thing any of us can do, because even though God seemingly lost everything in letting go his only-begotten Son, in truth he gained everything—including, most importantly, you and me.

In his poem "Walking Way" Cecil Day Lewis puts it this way:

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

This morning the risen Christ calls each of us by name in the garden of this Easter Day. And when he calls us by name, he startles us awake so we can see him and hear him telling us that we don't need to stay in the glass castle in the garden any longer. "Do not hold on to me," he says. Let go of all of the dark stuff which is holding you back. Let go and abide in the garden of Resurrection life—the life we've been longing and searching and waiting for, the life that even now we can walk into—and hold on to forever.