

St Mark's, Niagara-on-th- Lake
Easter Day, year 'C'
17 April 2022
The Rev'd Leighton Lee

In our gospel this morning, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb in the dim light of early dawn. She has come to spend time with her dear friend who has died and to grieve and to try to find some comfort. But what she finds gives no comfort at all: she finds the stone of the tomb rolled away and the body gone. She runs to get some other friends, who come in double-quick time, but seeing the empty tomb, they conclude there is nothing they can do and go away. And Mary is left weeping by an empty tomb alone.

As she is weeping, she feels the presence of another person standing close by, someone she doesn't recognize. "Woman, why are you weeping?" the stranger asks. "Whom are you looking for?" She takes this mysterious stranger, who has appeared as if out of thin air, to be the gardener and replies, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." And then comes the moment of recognition, the moment when this stranger calls her by name, "Mary," and she realizes at once that it is Jesus. Overwhelmed with joy, she reaches out to touch him, to pull him closer, to look into his eyes. But he pulls back and says something stern—even hurtful. He says, "Do not hold on to me."

Many of you have seen Titian's great painting "Noli me tangere"—Do Not Touch Me. It depicts our gospel scene in wonderful detail. Mary is on the ground, on her knees, as if in supplication, and is reaching out her hand toward the risen Christ. But he is leaning back, and is even pulling the shroud away from her. "Do not hold on to me."

It was such a strange thing for Jesus to say and these days, when we can finally get close to and hug and kiss our loved ones again, it seems particularly perverse. Surely it wasn't unreasonable for Mary to react as she did. Surely it wasn't unreasonable for Mary to want to make sure her senses, or her reason, weren't failing her. Surely it wasn't unreasonable for her to want to reach out and touch a friend she had thought was dead, but was now, incredibly, alive.

Yet he said, "Do not hold on to me." Except he wasn't talking about physical distancing. He was talking about how Mary had to let go of the Jesus she knew, the Jesus of the past. Titian's painting is set in a contemporary landscape with the sun is just rising over the crest of the hills. The point is that the new, radically different—and even bewildering—age which dawned on the first Easter is an ongoing reality. History itself has been cleaved in two, and when Jesus said to Mary "Do not hold on to me," he was saying that everything she knew, everything she drew comfort from and found to be safe, was changed. Life was changed. The Universe was changed. Existence was

changed, and she could not hold on to what was. She could not hold on to shroud of death. She had to open up her hands to take hold of the garment of new life.

Do not hold on to me. Old securities and familiar ways are changed. You and I know all about that. Whatever happens when this pandemic is *finally* over, life will be greatly changed. In many ways it already is. The rhythm of life has been changed. The way we work has been changed. Even the way we gather and socialize has been changed. And in the face of so much change, in a world which may be almost unrecognizable, is it any wonder that we try to cling to the past? There's something terribly out of joint about our present time, and it seems that a lot of us think that security, happiness, and meaning will come by means of retrenchment and reminiscence.

But Jesus saying "Do not hold on to me" presents us with a different picture—and with a challenge. It tells us not to cling to the old securities, to the past, to the familiar. If you and I are to know the power of the risen Christ in our own lives, we must have the courage to let go of old certainties, old ways of thinking, old ways of being. The challenge of Easter is that for those of us who live on the other side of the great rupture in time, it can no longer be business as usual. There are new and wonderful things that have yet to happen which we are called to help bring to life.

I know I'm not alone in rejoicing in the fact that we can all be here in person for Easter. It feels like old times—almost. But we can't stay here forever any more than we can say, "This is it. This is the end. Nothing more can be learned, and nothing more need be done." Christ calls us each by name in the garden of this Easter morning and that means that the journey of faith begins anew today. When the Risen One calls us by name, he startles us awake and tells us that we cannot remain in the garden of recollection any longer. "Do not hold on to me," he says. If we want to know the power this day points to, we must let go of what we knew, what we want, even of who we are. For how else will we be able to take hold of the new life that is opening up?—the life we have been longing and yearning and searching for, the life that God raised him to early this morning, some measurable years ago, which, in the scale of things on this old earth, makes it still good news.