

Letting Go
John 20:1–18, 19–25; Colossians 3:1–4
Sunday, April 12, 2020 (Easter)

I've been a pastor for 15 years, and I've been *going* to worship on Easter Sunday for 41 years, and this is without a doubt the *strangest* Easter I have ever experienced. I mean, this is the biggest Sunday of the Christian year, and I am standing here preaching an Easter sermon to an empty sanctuary. Because this morning, like all of you, I'm in my house, shut off from everyone except those closest to me. There is so much that I miss right now about the ways that I have come to experience Easter over the years.

I miss the drive to church; getting in my car early in the morning, when the sun is just coming up and everything is still and quiet; every year I turn off the radio and drive here in silence, and the verse runs through my head that we heard earlier, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, they went to the tomb..." and I imagine myself going to Christ's tomb, only to discover that he's not there. I miss that this year.

I miss the smell of the lilies filling the sanctuary. (I know not everyone likes that, but I do.) The bright white flowers and the overpowering smell of something *different*, something *alive*.

I miss the buzz and the energy that comes when you all start filling this space – shaking hands, hugging, greeting one another with the words, "Christ is risen!"

I miss the *color* of this day. That might sound strange, but from my vantage point up here, I look out and see all of you dressed in your Easter outfits – pinks and blues and yellows and greens. It's *brighter* than every other day. And as I look out now, all I see is the brown wood of the pews, so I miss the color.

I miss the music. The grand blast of the organ belting out hymns that just seem *bigger* today. Strings and brass and the choir singing.

I miss the Easter Egg hunt that my kids always do in the Memorial Garden when worship ends.

I miss the Easter dinner that we always have at Jen's aunt's house, where 20 of us gather around a table and eat way too much food, and I end up falling asleep on the couch.

I would imagine that there are things we are *all* missing today, whether it's family and friends or sights and sounds. This is a very strange Easter for *all* of us. It just doesn't feel like the grand celebration, the high holy day that we have all come to know. But what we have to remember is that that first Easter was not a grand celebration. It was filled with *confusion* and *fear* and *doubt*. That first Easter morning didn't take place in a packed church. It took place at an empty tomb. And it ended with the disciples sequestered, locked away inside a house, afraid, grief-stricken, not knowing what was going on or what was going to happen next. So while this might be the *strangest* Easter of our lives, it might also be the most *authentic* Easter of our lives; the most in keeping with the biblical story that we have ever experienced.

But like those first disciples, there are some things that we have to let go of in order to experience Christ's risen presence with us.

Mary goes to the tomb that morning, expecting to find Jesus' body. Because that's how it works, right? When you *die*, you *stay dead*. She doesn't seem to recognize these two angels sitting in the tomb; she keeps looking for Jesus' body. She doesn't even recognize *Jesus* when he appears;

she thinks he is the gardener and that *he* has taken Jesus' body away. She keeps looking for his body, holding on to the reality and the power of death. Holding on to the way that she understands the world to work. Holding on to the way that things have always been. But then Jesus speaks her name, and she recognizes him. And the first thing he says to her is, "Do not hold on to me." Because she's holding on to the Jesus that she *knew*; the one who *died*. And Jesus is saying, "You have to let go of me, so that you can see me and experience me for who I truly *am*."

The disciples are locked in their house, afraid. Their teacher and Messiah has been killed, and if they're not careful, *they might be next*. It's all over for them; this whole movement that they have devoted three years of their lives to has died with Jesus. They're huddled in this room, holding on to fear and failure and grief and uncertainty. When all of a sudden, Jesus is standing there among them! And in the midst of their fear and failure and grief and uncertainty, he says, "Peace. Peace be with you. You have to let go of your fear and your grief and your uncertainty so you can know my peace and see me and experience me for who I truly am." And then it says that they *saw* him and *rejoiced*. So Jesus *breathes* on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." *You have to let go of what you're holding onto so that you can hold on to the Holy Spirit. We're going to come back to that.*

But like us, the disciples couldn't even all be together in one place. Judas obviously wasn't there after betraying Jesus. And it says that Thomas wasn't there either. When the others tell him, "We have seen the Lord," Thomas says, "Unless I see and touch the mark of the nails in his hands and his side, I will not believe." Thomas is still holding on to old wounds and the way that

Jesus *was*. But he's going to have to let go of that if he wants to see and experience Jesus for who he is *now*.

Mary, the disciples, and Thomas are all holding on to things that keep them from seeing and experiencing the risen Christ. What are *we* holding onto that is keeping *us* from seeing and experiencing the risen Christ among us today? Are we holding on to the way Easter always *has* been; the way we've celebrated it in the past; the way we feel like it's "supposed" to be? Are we holding on to the way things were before this virus and quarantine and just waiting for it to go back to that? Are we holding on to fear? Doubt? Pain? Old wounds? Sin – whether it's what *we* have done or what someone else has done *to* us? Shame? Sadness? Grudges? Addictions? We can spend so much time and energy holding onto those things and focusing on *them* that we can't see the ways that Christ is with us *now*, bringing about something *new* and *good*, inviting us into a *new* life.

Jesus says to *them*, "Do not hold on to me. You have to let go of who I *was*, or who you *thought* I was, so that you can experience me for who I am *now*." Paul talks about this in his letter to the Colossians when he says, "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are *above*, where Christ is...set your minds on things that are *above*, not on things that are on *earth*." If we want to live this new life with Christ, then we can't keep holding on to earthly things. We have to *let go* of them so that we can hold on to the things that are *above*, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. So we let go of fear, and we hold on to love. We let go of doubt, and we hold on to trust. We let go of old wounds and pain, and we hold on to the possibility of healing. We let go of sin and grudges and we hold on to forgiveness – of others *and* of ourselves. We let go of shame and sadness, and we hold on to joy. We let go of death, and we hold on to life.

Valerie Nicolet-Anderson writes that “we cannot continue leading our lives as if things had not radically changed. We have died to the old way of understanding the world and ourselves, and our real life is now embodied in who we are in Christ.”

What is she talking about there, our *physical* situation or our *spiritual* situation? Because I can hear that a couple of different ways. We can't just physically go out and do whatever we want to do; we can't just come here on Easter morning and do things the way we have done them before, because things have radically changed, and we have to understand the world and our lives in new ways. In the same way, in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, this world and our lives have changed. We cannot just keep living our lives as if nothing has changed. We have to let go of the way things *were*, of *earthly* things, so that we can take hold of the things that are *above*.

And we've already had to let go of one of the hardest things – *each other*. Just as Mary's instinctual reaction in the midst of her fear and grief and uncertainty is to hold on to Jesus, *our* instinctual reaction is to hold on to *each other* during times of fear and grief and uncertainty. But Jesus tells Mary that now is not the time to remain physically with him. Just as *we* know that now is not the time for us to physically be with each other. But have we *really* let go of each other (and of *Christ*), or are we just learning to hold on in new ways? Is this experience of isolation leading us into a new, lived understanding of the Holy Spirit and how God's Spirit binds us to one another as the Body of Christ? Is the loss of the *physical* connection leading us to a new and deeper understanding of the *spiritual* connection?

We've always understood the church to be the community of believers that worships and sings and prays and eats and serves and lives life together. But are we being invited now to see a bigger picture of what it means to be the Body of Christ? That we are connected to God and to

each other even in the experience of absence. That as Christ is physically absent from us, we are bound to him through the power of the Holy Spirit, and that as we are physically absent from one another, we are bound to each other through the power of that same Spirit. Perhaps we are being invited in this time to let go of the way things *were*, the way we always understood things to *be*, so that we can take hold of the *new thing* that God is doing and the new *church* that God is creating.

The other week someone sent me a poem that I think speaks to this. It's by a retired teacher and chaplain named Kitty O'Meara, and it goes like this:

And the people stayed home
And read books, and listened, and
Rested, and exercised, and made art,
and played games, and learned new ways
of being, and were still. And listened
more deeply. Some meditated, some
prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows.

And the people began to think differently.
And the people healed. And in the
absence of people living in ignorant,
dangerous, mindless and heartless ways,
the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the
people joined together again,
they grieved their losses,
and made new choices,
and dreamed new images,
and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully,
as they had been healed.

What are we holding onto in this time of fear and grief and uncertainty? The hope that things will go back to the way they were before? Or the hope that God is doing a new thing, creating something new in this world and in our lives? While our circumstances may have changed from previous years, the message and the meaning of this day have not. Christ is risen! He has overcome the power of sin and death and fear and doubt, that *we* might be raised up *with him* to

live a new life. He is calling us to let go of the old life that we are holding onto and take hold of the things that are above, making new choices, dreaming new dreams, and healing as we have been healed, in Christ. Amen.