

SERMON TITLE: "Don't Hold on to Me"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:1-18
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 16, 2017 (Easter) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Pastors and churches are always looking for new ways to communicate the story and message of Easter. Many years ago, when I was pastor of the United Methodist Church in Yuma, Colorado, the folks there told me about a creative method they had tried in the past. They had placed an order with a company that sold educational science projects. Some weeks before Easter, they received a bunch of caterpillars in cocoons. According to the instructions, the congregation carefully nurtured the cocoons in a special container. Each Sunday of Lent, during the children's sermon, the pastor and the children would look at the cocoons and see how they were progressing. Then, finally, by Easter Sunday morning, sure enough, the dead-looking cocoons had split open, and the caterpillars were transformed into lively butterflies. It was a fantastic symbol of how God had raised Jesus from the dead. As the grand finale to the Easter worship service, the children and adults all went outside the church to let the butterflies fly away to glorious resurrection life.

Well, that was how it was supposed to be, anyway. Unfortunately, what actually happened was that the weather was too cold on that Easter Day, and the just-released butterflies immediately died and fell to the ground. Butterflies are delicate creatures—as all of us know from the days when we were kids. I'd be surprised if there is anyone here today who hasn't tried at one time or another to catch a butterfly. Because of their mysterious beauty, we wanted to hold them in our hands. But the sad lesson we learned as children is that butterfly wings are fragile. Even though we meant no harm, the butterflies were easily damaged. As we grew up, we realized that there are some wonders that we just shouldn't hold on to.

I guess that's what Jesus was trying to tell Mary that first Easter morning. As they stood in the garden outside the tomb, Jesus probably wanted to embrace Mary just as much as she wanted to cling to him. Who wouldn't need a hug after being arrested, falsely charged, beaten, and crucified? Who wouldn't want to rush into the arms of a loved one after the horrible trauma of death and the amazing miracle of resurrection? But, as Mary reached for Jesus in glad recognition and relief, Jesus lovingly responded, "Don't hold on to me."

1—HOLDING ON LIMITS JESUS

Mary was probably surprised by these unexpected words from Jesus, as we may be. But I suspect Jesus responded this way for several reasons. The first of those reasons would be that holding on limits Jesus. As much as Mary loved Jesus, she loved him the way he had been in the past. He was precious to her just the way she had known him. She didn't want him to change.

That's why Mary went to the tomb early that morning. Mary had helped put Jesus' body there, and she expected him to stay there. When his body was missing, Mary asked the gardener where they had put Jesus, so she could go and get him. Like all of us who grieve and mourn, Mary was bargaining, trying desperately not to accept the loss that had occurred. What Mary didn't know was that Jesus would not be the Christ if he were limited to where we mere mortals could put him. As the divine Son of God, Jesus is too big to be confined to the small space of a tomb or to the even smaller place of our perceptions, beliefs, and certainties.

Holding on to Jesus with our small human grasp means limiting Jesus to what we think we're looking for. That's like going into a Chinese restaurant, but refusing to order anything to eat and then giving them a bad review because they don't have cheeseburgers on the menu. If we only allow ourselves to experience Jesus in a narrow way, we may not be able to appreciate all that he really is.

This happens when we think we already possess all the knowledge we need about something or somebody. This week I read a quotation from our United Methodist founder John Wesley. Back in the

1700s, he preached to the Methodist people, “I must entreat you, in the Name of God, be open to conviction.” By “be open to conviction” Wesley meant “be open to being convinced of some new idea.” Then he went on to say, “Whatever prejudices you have contracted from education, custom, or example, divest yourselves of them, as far as possible. Be willing to receive light either from God or (other people); do not shut your eyes against it. Rather be glad to see more than you did before, to have the eyes of your understanding opened.”*

Mary went to the tomb looking for her beloved teacher’s dead body, but she left knowing that Jesus had become much, much more. When we hold on too tightly, we limit Jesus to what our finite imaginations think he should be. But if we loosen our grip and allow God to work the miracle of resurrection, we will discover a marvelously infinite and divine risen Lord.

2—HOLDING ON LIMITS US

Holding on too tightly not only limits Jesus, but it also limits us. Think about Mary. Her natural reaction to Jesus’ death was grief and sadness. Her normal response to the disappearance of his body was shock and dismay. While holding on to Jesus’ risen body might have eased those painful emotions for a while, eventually Mary would have had to accept that Jesus wasn’t the same as he was before. Eventually, she would have had to face her loss. For sure, we all gain comfort and strength by remembering the good times and quality relationships we’ve had in the past. But if Mary were to get stuck, holding only to the good old days she had spent with Jesus, she would have prolonged her grief. She would have limited her own progress toward healing.

Holding on also limits us to former roles. Previously, Mary was one of Jesus’ followers. Spiritually immature, and needing to learn, she did well to sit at Jesus’ feet. But now, Jesus was asking her to let go of him, so she could run and tell the disciples the news that Jesus had risen from the dead. If Mary stayed there clinging to Jesus, she would remain a follower. But if she would go tell the disciples that she had seen and spoken with Jesus, then Mary would become a leader in the resurrection faith.

In this role shift from follower to leader, Mary would also break through the limits of gender stereotypes. In the Jewish culture of that day, a woman would have been considered an unreliable source of information. By all standards of that time, the first witness should have been Peter or James or John. But, according to each of the four gospels, it was one or more women who first found the empty tomb. The Gospels of Matthew and John both name Mary Magdalene as one of those women who first saw Jesus after the resurrection.

When Jesus says, “Don’t hold on to me,” he’s telling us not to limit ourselves to the emotions, roles, and stereotypes of the past. Jesus doesn’t need a bunch of sad, timid followers clinging to him. What Jesus needs is for us to become strong, forward-looking leaders in the faith.

3—HOLDING ON LIMITS LIFE

A third reason we shouldn’t hold on too tightly is that holding on limits life. When Jesus told Mary, “Don’t hold on to me,” he was telling her that this earthly existence isn’t the end all and be all. Jesus wanted Mary to know that there’s life beyond what we experience in these frail human bodies. He was assuring Mary that he was going to be with God. Jesus wanted Mary and the rest of the disciples to know that they could someday be with God also.

When we hold on too much to this earthly life, we limit ourselves to anxiety. We put too much weight and value on things that don’t matter all that much. We overemphasize trivial things. We obsess and feel a need to control. Who among us hasn’t worried ourselves nearly sick about some situation that was developing, only later to realize that it was no big deal? Or, at least not as big a deal as we thought. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t take life seriously. Of course, we should plan many things carefully and put forth our best efforts. We should practice safety. We shouldn’t be sloppy. We should certainly be mindful of how our actions and attitudes affect other people. But how many of the things we do are really earth-shattering? And who doesn’t make mistakes from time to time?

We need to put ourselves in perspective and practice an attitude of forgiveness and grace for ourselves as well as for other people. We need to learn to laugh at ourselves. It's the humble recognition that there's a lot more to life than what we see here that allows us to move into eternal life with God. It's that ability to let loose of our tight grip on this bodily, material, death-entombed existence that frees our spirits to rise with Christ in resurrection joy.

CONCLUSION

There's often a scripture or poem printed on the inside of funeral folders. One of those poems that I have seen is titled "Miss Me, but Let Me Go."

When I come to the end of the road,
and the sun has set for me,
I want no rites in a gloom-filled room.
Why cry for a soul set free?
Miss me a little—but not too long,
and not with your head bowed low.
Remember the love that we once shared.
Miss me—but let me go.

This is a journey we all must take,
and each must go alone.
It's all a part of the Master's Plan,
a step on the road to home.
When you are lonely and sick of heart,
go to the friends we know.
And bury your sorrow in doing good deeds.
Miss me—but let me go.

"Miss me, but let me go." That's what Jesus meant when he told Mary to go and share the Easter news with the other disciples. Jesus doesn't want us to limit him; he wants us to worship him as our divine risen Lord. Jesus doesn't want us to limit ourselves, either; he wants us to be strong forward-looking leaders in the faith. And Jesus certainly doesn't want us to limit life; he wants us to experience hope and joy in this world and the next. That's why, on this Easter morning, Jesus lovingly tells us, "Don't hold on to me."

*As quoted by UM Bishop Karen Oliveto on her Facebook page, April 12, 2017.