

If you have never taken the time to read all four gospel versions of the Easter story side by side, you might want to try it as a little exercise, maybe even this afternoon during commercial breaks of the Masters Tournament. If you do, you will find that the four versions are rather different in their details. For example Luke says that three women went to the tomb at dawn on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion; John's gospel says that only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, and it was still dark. Some people may get rather distressed over these inconsistencies in the story. They will say that one or the other of the stories must be true, but they can't both be true. But that is to miss the point. For the truth of the Easter stories is not whether John's or Luke's version is historically correct. Rather, the truth of the Easter stories is that the message of Jesus Christ cannot stay confined in a tomb. That's because Jesus' message is a life giving and life affirming message which not even death itself can snuff out.

It's interesting that in the gospel of John's version of the story, after Peter and "the other disciple" left the tomb to go back to their condominiums, Mary Magdalene stays around to sort of get her wits about her and to try to figure out what the heck was going on. She then realizes that a man is standing nearby, and supposing him to be the gardener, she

asks if he knows what happened to Jesus. The man calls to her “Mary,” and she instantly realizes that it is Jesus. Jesus then tells her not to hold on to him or cling to him. That has always struck me as an odd statement. Here is Mary, extremely distraught, even traumatized about the horrible events of the last few days, and when Jesus appears to her as very much alive, Jesus says to her, “Sorry, but don’t get too close, don’t hold on to me.” And the only reason Jesus gives for this odd comment is that he hasn’t yet ascended to his Father.

Imagine that the fifteen British sailors who had been captured by Iran and were released and returned to their families on Thursday had said to their parents, wives and children, “Sorry, you can’t hold on to me; I haven’t yet been debriefed. So look, but don’t touch.” How strange would that have been? Instead, I’m sure there was much hugging, kissing and clinging as the fifteen sailors walked into the room where their families were waiting for them.

So the mystery in John’s Easter story of the “no clinging” command sticks out like a sore thumb. It forces scholars and preachers to put on their detective hats and to try to dig below the surface of the story. What is going on here? Why is Jesus so stand offish? It can’t be because he doesn’t want to get his Easter outfit wrinkled.

Well perhaps this one little phrase in the story is a hint to us that this is more than just a simple newspaper account of what happened that first Easter morning. Perhaps this is a sign (and John's gospel is full of signs) that Mary, the disciples and we can no longer look at Jesus in the same way. To cling to Jesus is to keep him trapped here in this world; but Jesus and his message are bigger, far bigger than this world of death and despair. We cannot remember him as simply a teacher, or even a healer or miracle worker. Instead, Jesus, what he did, and what he taught transcends this world, and even death itself. Death has no power over Jesus and his message because death is what this world is about; but Jesus is about life, peace, goodness, wholeness and many more life giving realities.

Preaching the Easter sermon is perhaps the hardest task any preacher will have. That's because we preach about something that is nearly impossible for us to get our minds around. It is understandable that people want to think of Jesus' resurrection as merely the resuscitation of a dead body. But that's not what the Easter stories tell us. The Easter stories tell us that a new and different kind of reality has broken through and penetrated the apparently absolute, hard core reality that death and sin and war and murder and hate and bigotry and all the other negatives of this world are the only things that are real in this world. But not so, say the Easter stories.

The Easter stories tell us that God is doing a new thing in Jesus that overcomes the negatives of the world. And if God is doing a new thing in Jesus, then God can do a new thing in us as well. Which reality do we want to belong to? The new life filled Jesus reality of an early Easter morning, or the old worn out world reality of a Good Friday where violence and hate are the only options? As a parish, we have taken some steps toward this new reality. During the six Sundays in Lent we took up a second offering in support of the Millennium Development Goals; next Sunday evening, we will feed homeless people for the Vision program; and on the 28<sup>th</sup> we will sponsor a spaghetti supper to raise funds for Cori's place which provides a day program for handicapped adults.

“Don't cling to me” says Jesus to Mary Magdalene in the garden. “Let me rise; let me ascend; let me go to my Father, and your Father; to my God and your God.” Then Mary filled with the amazing truth of the risen Jesus and the new reality that has broken into the world runs to the disciples and is the first person in the old world who tells about a new world that has come. She runs and tells the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” Or to put our own spin on Isaiah's vision, the MDG's are several hundred dollars closer to realization, the homeless are fed, and the adult clients at Cori's place know

that we care about them because we, too, have seen the Lord whose “new reality” is alive in us.