

## RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD | MARCH 31, 2024

VIGIL: EZEKIEL 36:24-28 | PSALM 114 | ROMANS 6:3-11 | JOHN 20:1-18

DAY: ACTS 10:34-43 | 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11 | JOHN 20:1-18

“Don’t touch me.” It’s a strange thing to hear from Jesus. Doesn’t really sound like Jesus. Sure enough, next week, we’ll hear the story of Thomas meeting the risen Christ. “Reach out your hand and put it in my side,” Jesus tells Thomas. Go ahead. Touch me. So why does Jesus tell Mary Magdalene not to?

The difference between Mary Magdalene and Thomas is that Mary wants to cling to Jesus, to grab on to him, to hold fast to him. It’s not the physical touch that Jesus is worried about. It’s Mary’s desire to have Jesus *here*. Somewhere known. Somewhere comfortable. Somewhere safe.

Mary’s impulse is understandable. She has just witnessed the execution of her friend. She is beset by grief. She is struggling to understand. At this moment, all she wants is for things to go back to normal, back to the way they were in Galilee. More meals together. More conversation together. Most of all, more time together.

And now Jesus’s appearance presents her with an unexpected opportunity. Maybe this was all a misunderstanding. Maybe Jesus wasn’t killed after all. As long as she can keep him here, maybe things can go back to the way they used to be.

We get the appeal. It can be reassuring to believe that things can go back to the way they were. You can think of lots of benign examples of this. When we make our favorite “comfort” food, we usually mean an old favorite from our childhood. When we go to a concert, we want the band to play the hits. When we fire up Netflix, we want the same 90s sitcom that we’ve already seen three times. (Or at least I do.) We have an affection for familiarity and routine, stability and tradition.

None of those are inherently bad, of course. But when taken too far, our harkening back to the past can prevent us from looking clearly at problems and possibilities of the world around us. When our desire for familiarity becomes too strong, it makes our communities more insular and homogenous. It reduces our political debates into whether we can recover an idealized past. And it calcifies our life of faith into something self-referential and self-preserving.

This is the impulse that Jesus appears concerned about. That our desire to keep Jesus *here* will turn him into nothing more than an object, an amulet, or a good luck charm. Someone who, when we’re in a pinch, we can call on to tell us that we’re right. That we’re not to blame. That we’re good. And once we’re feeling better about ourselves, we can simply put him back in storage. But a Jesus at our beck and call isn’t really Jesus at all. Just God made in the image of our own projections and desires.

The risen Christ, St. John tells us, is not a figure who can be clung to or grasped at. He is a living presence who can only be followed. You notice in this story that Jesus doesn’t just tell Mary not to touch him. He also gives her a task, what we might call a vocation. “Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me... But go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

John’s Jesus does something remarkable in that one sentence. Not only does he give Mary an apostolic responsibility—“Go and tell...”—he also acknowledges that their relationship has irreversibly changed. Things are different now.

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Up to this point in St. John's gospel, Jesus has referred to the group of people who follow him as his disciples or his servants. And now on Easter morning, he refers to them as his brothers. Literally, as people who have been born from the same womb. And then, the most remarkable shift of all. Throughout John's gospel, Jesus often refers to God "my God" or "my Father." And here on Easter morning, Jesus expands this further, "I am ascending to my Father *and your Father*, to my God *and your God*."<sup>1</sup>

That relationship between Jesus and the God he called his Father cannot be broken by anything, not even by death. And now on Easter morning, Jesus invites Mary, his brothers, and all of us to share that same unbreakable relationship, that same power of the living God. We call that power the Holy Spirit. That power raised Jesus from death, and it raises us to new life, too.

In other words, Easter is not a story about Jesus coming back to life. If it were, it would be a story about resuscitation. Instead, it's a story about Jesus being called from death into God's promised future. It's a story about resurrection.

Jesus offers us this same gift of resurrection transformation as we follow him in the way of his cross and resurrection. Of being unmade and remade. Of being stripped of the self-righteousness and certainty that prevents us from loving our neighbors. Of being remade in the image of God's unceasing light. Born again from the same womb as brothers, sisters, and siblings in God's image.

The words Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene are the same ones Christ speaks to us today. Do not cling to me. But go. In a world of so much violence, go forth to live as peacemakers. In a world of so much hatred, go forth to live as ambassadors of reconciliation. In a world of so much death, go forth as signs of God's unending life.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>1</sup> See N. T. Wright, *John* (InterVarsity Press, 2009).