

**The Rev. James S. Ward**

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.  
(Col. 3:1-4)

I fear this is going to be among the most unsatisfying Easter sermons you've ever heard! So get ready for it. This is not so much because of the preacher, inadequate and unsatisfying as he may be, but because the material is so strange. It is not about what we think it is about or should be about.

It is clear that Mary Magdalen is not seeking “things that are above” as she approaches the tomb this morning. She comes to do to the body what could not be done earlier because the sabbath came on. But the tomb is empty. Her mind is already pretty well made up about what has happened when she runs to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple. The report she gives them is, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” There is a kind of desperation that is added to her grief and frustration.

By the time she sees the gardner, she has no more answers. The other two disciples have come and gone—“Then the disciples returned to their homes”—a strange detail if there ever was one. Even though the narrator tells us that one of them climbed down into the tomb and saw “the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up and in a place by itself,” and that he “believed,” neither has said anything to Mary. Little wonder, now abandoned, she stands at the empty tomb weeping.

Bending over she sees inside the tomb where the body had been laid she sees two angels in white. They ask, “Woman why are you weeping?” Apparently unimpressed with their angelic dignity, she sticks to her story. But in repeating her complaint she reveals something of the depth of her personal loss: “They have taken away *my* Lord, and *I* do not know where they have laid him.” Even before she encounters Jesus, now risen, we are clear that her grief is inconsolable. Nothing will satisfy her but the body of Jesus itself.

After answering the question of the angels, she turns around and sees Jesus standing there. But, of course, she doesn't recognize him. By now her expectations, her frustration, and her grief have made it impossible for her to recognize the figure that stands before her. She assumes he is the gardner. Who else would be there that early on the day following the sabbath.

But honestly, we're having a similar problem with this passage! Something about Mary's single-minded stubbornness is annoying. After all, she went all the way back with the news that the tomb was empty and reporting the body had been stolen. Yet the male disciples racing each other to the tomb to confirm her story are apparently somewhat more open to another explanation. Perhaps they remember his telling them on the road that he was to be arrested,

crucified and that on the third day, he would rise again. But faced with a figure that in the light of dawn appears to be the gardener, she still seems obsessed with her interpretation: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Not even the angelic figures in dressed in white and seated inside the tomb where the body should have been—even when they ask after her sorrow, “Woman, why are you weeping—not even that seems to have fazed her. Her experience has a dream-like quality where she is sleepwalking through it.

But that’s how grief works, a part of us has died with the beloved one, and we are stuck with the question their death raised for us. Why? who? how? and anger is always a part of it. Sometimes its a kind of paranoid anger like that we see here in Mary Magdalene, looking for someone to blame, desperate to uncover a conspiracy, straining for an answer that will stop the pain.

Now here is where you are going to be disappointed. I know you come to Easter Sunday expecting a BIG message, since the resurrection is so central to the Christian faith, a message that will confirm for you Jesus’ victory over sin and death. But even more than that, the continuity of the soul, the survival of the individual beyond death. And all the glistening of the transfiguration story, the shout of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus, the appearance of the angels at the resurrection, that we find portrayed first in Mark’s version of the Easter story, all these fireworks go into our expectation. Such, after all, is the stuff of religion and miracle, the trappings anyone would expect to find on an Easter morning. Why else do we have so often at Easter trumpets and tympany. And the sermon should trumpet the message as well, “He is Risen! Alleluia”

But if we are faithful to the text, then it is not so much about the overcoming of death with glorious resurrection display but about recognition and mis-recognition. In Mark’s Gospel the angel, who of course in that gospel is not yet an angel but a “young man in a white garment,” tells the women that Jesus whom they are seeking is not there but has risen. He invites them into the tomb to look for themselves and gives them a commission, “Go and tell Peter and the other disciples that he has risen and that they should go to Galilee and he we meet them there.”

We could say that this much later version of the story is about what meeting Jesus is like. How it involves a change, a transformation of our capacity to recognize him in another. It is a kind of double-take, a letting-go of our expectations and the grip that death has in our lives because of grief or fear or false bravado. Our very identity is so invested in the way we see, the way we believe things are, or are supposed to be, that that we can be at a loss when people and things are not in their proper place. You know what it’s like to run into someone from church in the supermarket. You can become shy, rude even because you can’t remember where you know them from or what their name is and rather than stumble through, we often prefer to sneak around the aisles.

And of course our expectations when it comes to seeking Jesus are much more fraught. Take Mary. She had been affirmed for sitting at the feet of Jesus to receive his teaching. No rabbi had women disciples, but Martha, who appears a bit more traditional in resenting her sister for

abandoning her to the dishes, receives from Jesus a revolutionary teaching we're still trying to take in. He says in response to Martha's complaint that Mary "has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her." When Mary here at the empty tomb finally recognizes this "gardner" as Jesus, and calls him the familiar of "Teacher," like "Dear Beloved Teacher," all of that relationship of a special student of a beloved teacher is lifted up.

Her relationship with Him had already been tested by a death, the death of her brother. We learn that he was probably Jesus' best friend, yet he waited four days before going to him when he heard Lazarus was sick, and when he finally arrived Mary was a little peeved at him to say the least. "If you had been here. . ." she begins, in a protest identical to that of her sister Martha a few verses afterward when he finally arrives at the place where she is grieving with the mourners for her lost brother. Then after Jesus calls for the stone to be rolled away from the tomb to the outrageous protests that the body, already dead four days, will stink, he goes ahead and calls him to come out of the tomb. Clearly while the logic of death has no real claim on him, he is simply not moved by it, it remains the primary basis for Mary's understanding. The tradition has put it differently. It has brought Jesus and Mary together in a love or carnal or erotic relationship. Some even claim that Mary Magdalene bore Jesus' son who was spirited away in Southern France to become the plot for silly novels like *The DaVinci Code*.

It is precisely this carnal expectation that is frustrated by the Easter story here in John. Her loss may be that much more complicated by her feelings of unrequited or unfulfilled love. Where the male disciples are wrestling with their guilt at abandoning Jesus in the garden and denying they even knew him in the courtyard of the high priest, Mary may well be struggling with her own romantic desires and plans now dashed by his fatal sense of mission. Jesus, now appearing as the gardner, echoes the very question the angels had already asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Then he repeats the question he had twice asked the soldiers of the high priest who came to arrest him in the garden. "Whom are you looking for?" Here the logic of death controls her judgment just as it does those who come to arrest Jesus. Neither can recognize him because their judgement is clouded by their prior commitments, expectations, and fantasies.

So Easter is not so much about fireworks and glorious assertions about life after death. It is really about recognizing those we love on their terms and not on those terms and expectations we want them to fulfill. When Jesus calls her by name, Mary is roused from her waking dream. In their moment of recognition all the expectations, disappointments and fantasies are brought to the fore. His simple statement says it all, "Do not hold on to me." Instead of offering something to hold on to, which is why we come to church on Easter, Jesus tells us not to hold on to him. The only way we can ever really meet the Lord or those we love but see no longer is precisely by not holding on to them, but by letting them go, by letting them grow into what God's loving purpose for them is. Then they will truly become our own, not to hold or to claim as a sign of our identity or our confidence of some righteousness, but as windows on the eternal life and love of God.