

Easter Sunday
Sunday, April 5, 2026
John 20:1-18

So is it just me, or is anyone else confused by what Jesus says to Mary Magdalene at the end of this passage? “Don’t hold on to me.”

I mean, **she** is the one at his tomb at 0 dark thirty on Sunday morning. **She’s** the one who sees the rock rolled away. When Peter and John leave, **she’s** still there. And then, when she’s found Jesus, what does he say to her? “Let go.” Why?

And I think the answer to this question tells us a lot about who Jesus is, but even more, it tells us about the nature of our faith journey.

It’s Sunday morning. Mary Magdalene is visiting Jesus’ tomb to finish the burial process. As she approaches the tomb, she realizes something’s wrong. The stone has been rolled away from the tomb entrance.

She’s shocked. She was expecting to see a sealed tomb with a dead Jesus inside. Instead, it’s open ... someone has taken his body.

Jesus’ friends Peter and John come and confirm the tomb is empty. They body’s gone. Then they leave.

But Mary doesn’t. She can’t. She looks inside the tomb for herself and sees something extraordinary. She sees angels. They ask her what she’s looking for, and she repeats her belief that someone has stolen Jesus’ body. In other words, she’s still looking for Jesus’ human remains.

And then something interesting happens. She turns. The Greek word used here is “strepho,” which also has the sense of “to change.” And this turning, this changing, coincides with her seeing Jesus. She didn’t leave. She’s stuck it out. She’s persevered. Now, she can see Jesus. Only she doesn’t recognize it’s him.

She’s still so focused on finding the dead Jesus that she can’t process the idea that he’s alive and standing right in front of her. I imagine it’s kind of like when you look in the fridge for the ketchup but **someone** has put it in the wrong place. (Or maybe that’s just me.) It’s right there, but you can’t see it. Even though she’s looking right at Jesus, Mary doesn’t recognize him.

Then Jesus says her name, and everything really does change for her. She literally “turns” the corner, and finally recognizes him.

But even in recognizing him, she continues to hold on to her old understanding of who he is. Rather than somehow recognize this new, glorious and resurrected Jesus standing before her, she calls him Rabbi, teacher. Even now, her instinct is to recall his humanity. To recall the times they sat around a fire telling stories and listening to his teaching.

And so it is at **this point** that Jesus tells her not to hold on. But the word he uses, the Greek word “*apto*,” doesn’t simply mean “to hold.” It has the sense of clinging. And in light of her progression through the course of this passage, we can now see why Jesus would want her to stop clinging to him.

To this point in the passage, she’s been clinging for all she’s worth to the Jesus that she knew. Despite the rock rolled away from the tomb, despite the angels in the tomb, despite the living Jesus standing right in front of her, she kept looking for a teacher Jesus, a friend Jesus, who was now dead and buried. And even when she recognized Jesus **as** Jesus, she still wanted to treat him as nothing more than her friend and teacher.

So, Jesus tells her to let go; to stop clinging to that old idea of him. Now, Jesus wasn’t telling her to ignore his friendship and his teaching. But he *was* telling her not to let her prior experience of him limit her understanding of who he really was. He was telling her that he is much more than what he did as her friend and teacher. He was telling her to let go of any conception of him that was limited to his physical self and to embrace the fact that he had not only lived, but he had also been crucified and resurrected.

And I think Mary’s experience in this passage encapsulates the faith journey many of us walk. We should all be searching for Jesus. But all too often, we’re searching for a Jesus who is dead and buried. A fine, moral, upstanding *man*, the greatest, most humble, most wise *man* ever to live. A *man* who gave us some really good rules to live by. But still just a man—a man who was crucified, died and was buried. And so, if we’re not careful, like Mary, we can spend our lives searching exclusively for that Jesus—the dead Jesus; the Jesus of the “thou shalt” and the “thou shalt not.” A Jesus who said some interesting things, but who really doesn’t have any impact on how we live our day to day lives.

But in this passage, Jesus tells us we should stop clinging to that Jesus. While we should see and understand the man Jesus, we don't need to **cling** to him because there's more—so much more. That same Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins. He died to bring us into right relationship with our God.

And that by itself would be awesome enough, but today we celebrate the fact that he was also resurrected. He conquered death so that by believing in him—accepting the scope of his love for us—we ourselves might not only be reconciled with God, but might also be born again into a new kind of life, a life lived *in* God's love, and God's hope, and peace, and joy; now and for all eternity.

Mary knew Jesus, or at least she thought she did. He was her friend. He was comfortable. He was familiar. So, she wanted to hold on to him and never let go. But Jesus tells her not to cling to the familiar. He tells her that he has changed—been transformed. And in that resurrection transformation, he has started something that will bring new and eternal life to humanity. She can cling to what she knew, or she can take the leap of faith into the new life Jesus has prepared for her.

So, my question for today is simple. What are you clinging to? Jesus came to give you not just instruction, not just friendship, but a totally new life; a life lived not in the drudgery that our culture tells us is normal life, but a life lived in the love, joy, peace, and hope of God Himself. So, this Easter day, I invite you—Jesus invites you—to let go and embrace that new life.