

Letting Go – Reaching Out

From the Eastertide sermon series: Easter People

Scripture: Mark 3:19b-21, 31-35; John 19: 25-27; Acts 1:12-14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Text: *“Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother.”* Mark 3:35

On Thursday last, the Christian Church celebrated the Festival of the Ascension, although this significant event in our calendar gets hardly a notice. Its truth is that the risen Christ lives in the very presence of God, that he is our reigning Lord and our friend at the throne of the universe, pleading our cause. In the Book of Acts, we are told that Jesus showed himself alive for forty days and then was seen by the disciples enveloped in a cloud and “lifted up.” Therefore, the Church names the 40th day after Easter Ascension Day, the event that completes the Easter miracle and sets the stage for the miracle of Pentecost, the pouring out of the Spirit on the Church, to be celebrated next Lord’s Day.

Today, then, we are still in the Season of Eastertide - the last of the Great Sundays of the Season of Easter, waiting now for the day of Pentecost.

Some months ago as I was contemplating the preaching for Eastertide, I decided on a series of biographical messages on biblical people whose lives were transformed by encounter with the Risen Lord - Peter and Thomas, Barnabas and Paul. And then I realized that this Sunday, the one between Ascension and Pentecost, was also Mother’s Day and I went through my annual struggle with how to handle Mother’s Day when it falls on a High Holy Day.

For one thing, at CCC we have broadened this day to include the Christian family. We have recognized that, while for some this day is filled with beauty, for others its remembrance brings sharp pain, for not only the ideal, the wholeness of family life, but also the hurt of brokenness is part of our human situation.

And so, how do we celebrate this day that has one meaning on the church calendar and another on the secular calendar?

It occurred to me that there is a narrative from Luke's Acts of the Apostles that takes place between the event of ascension and the day of Pentecost. Following the experience of the ascension of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, the disciples were in the upper room together praying, and with them were some women, among whom was Mary, the mother of our Lord.

And there it was - my Easter person for this Sunday - Mary, mother of Jesus; Mary, mother of us all. What a rich source of reflection this one provides. Think of the biblical story of her experience.

As I thought on these things, "pondering them in my heart," I realized I had never done a biographical sermon on Mary. And yet I have frequently thought about it. In my earlier years, I think I simply did not know what to do with this woman full of grace.

I knew that in the Roman Catholic tradition she was venerated to superhuman heights. Such dogma as her perpetual virginity, her bodily assumption into heaven, her role as co-mediatrix with her son raised serious questions in my narrowly-formed Protestant mind. I was suspect of the "Hail Marys" in the Catholic piety.

But I also knew our knee-jerk Protestant reaction and rejection resulted in our failure to give this woman her due and failed to bring into our devotion that soft feminine dimension which is so important because of our mistaken ascription of maleness to God Who transcends our sexual differentiation. It has been a great loss we've suffered because we've failed to see Mary in the wonder of her faith, obedience and human transformation.

Mary, peasant girl. Mary, recipient of God's special call to be mother of our Lord. Mary, entertainer of angels. Mary, recipient of the Spirit's creative energy. Mary, witness of her son's cruel crucifixion. Mary, in the wake of Easter in prayer for the Holy Spirit. Who was this woman? How was she transformed?

I've never preached on her life, even though over 30 years ago I heard a moving first person sermon which I still remember. But, I also remember that I felt some dissonance because Mary's experience came to expression in a man's voice.

How can a man possibly bring to expression the experience, the feelings of this great woman, this mother of us all?

And so, I've never dared presume to speak for Mary. Yet, I'm certain her story of transformation would enrich us all. If only she could tell her own story...

(Mary has been walking down the aisle during these last words; she pauses at the base of the steps of the chancel. Mr. Rhem notices. No words are exchanged. He gets up, offers the stool to her, and returns to his seat. Mary begins...)

“Have you ever had someone, when they were introducing you, sing your praises? It can make you squirm a bit. You wonder how long it will take them to know the real you, the one, you know, who from your perspective falls far short of the one being described. You wonder whether with all integrity you shouldn’t be the first to admit what they are certain, eventually, to discover for themselves.

Can you imagine, then, what it has been like for me? You’ve seen the paintings, and the statues. I am eternally innocent, always delicately beautiful, holier than most. Always somewhat elevated, above it all, gazing down from stained glass or, if a statue, just above eye level, perched in a niche carved out of the sanctuary wall, inevitably cast with an all-knowing look of divine wisdom.

‘All-knowing.’ Let me tell you how it *really* was - to be Mary, the mother of Jesus.

At first, terrifying. Pregnant. Unwed. I took a deep breath and took on the world, at the age of 13. I knew scorn and disbelief awaited me when I told them what I knew - knew beyond all knowing - that the child growing within me was blessed by God, chosen by God, that somehow God was even in the fathering. I remember their looks, their whispers. I burned with ... shame? No, it wasn’t really shame. It was more with the fear and frustration of being unable to prove my integrity, to prove that, despite outward appearances, I, too, was blessed, loved by God. That I had been chosen - chosen to bear a child who one day the world would call Emmanuel – ‘God with us.’

And then the birth. I was frightened. And yet, having the child is the easy part, isn’t it? Raising them, nurturing them, loving them - that is the art. And it seems you know how to do it best by the time you bid farewell to the last one. He was my first, Jesus was. What I lacked in experience, hopefully I made up for in time - time to tell the stories, time to teach him the ways, the tradition, the responsibilities. Our people, Israel, had been blessed by God so that we might be a blessing. I taught him that - faithfully.

He has been called a child ‘full of grace and truth.’ Ah, he was that. I am, of course, unabashedly prejudiced. But that did not make him an easy child. He was bright. And Nazareth was not exactly a bustling center of learning. He was frustrated, I know, many times - yearning for more. It really *shouldn’t* have surprised me, that year in Jerusalem, when he could not pull himself away from the Temple, that he would love to be there, in the midst of the rabbis and the elders, asking questions to his heart’s content. Good questions they were, too. At least the ones I overheard.

Had I really been all-knowing, I would have seen then, that that moment was his first significant step away from me. He was almost 13, almost a man. It was time for me to begin letting go. But, all the years of care and love - and now to risk it all? It can be so hard. I’m sure you know.

When he took the pilgrimage out into the desert to encounter John the Baptist, son of my cousin Elizabeth, that was the next step. He went out to the wilderness to receive John's baptism. When he returned, I thought, I hoped, that he would be content for a time, that he would pick up his carpenter's tools and be part of the family again. But, it wasn't to be. Something had happened to him out in that desert wilderness. His friends told me that he had experienced God's Spirit descending upon him like a dove, that God's voice had called him. He had come home to follow that call, to bring the voice he had heard to all who had eyes to see and ears to hear.

He began preaching and teaching and even healing. He spoke with such authority - it fascinated people. It made *me* uneasy. His words, and his actions: associating openly with sinners, healing on the Sabbath - they flew in the face of our traditions and mores.

Once I had stood and faced the world, strong in my truth, so I understood the need to take a stand. I knew he was a grown man, old enough to be responsible for his own consequences. And yet, when I heard that he had returned home again from Capernaum, heard that crowds were gathered at his door, heard the neighbors and scribes saying that he was dangerous, a devil, out of his mind, primal motherly instincts surged to the surface. His brothers and I went to the house where he was staying and called for him to come out, come home, come to his senses.

Do you know what he said? The word came back to us that when they had given him our message, he looked around at those who sat about him and said, 'Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'

I was stunned! Hurt. But, there was something - a truth - in what he said. Not one I wanted to hear, really. I tried to get my heart around it. His words spoke of something larger than the intimate family, even the Jewish family. 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother...'

His ministry was short - barely three years - and then came his fateful determination to go to Jerusalem. His friends warned him. And I knew. It did not take divine omniscience to know that there he would most probably meet his end. He knew it, too, I think. But, to watch them crucify him - there is nothing natural or normal in watching the life that you birthed, the child you suckled, the innocent infant you watched blossom into an adult, hang there, screaming in pain, suffering, dying. Dear God! Why is this what they do to you when you speak the only truth you know?

I couldn't bear to watch ... and I couldn't bear to leave. And then I heard him speak, barely. He was so weak. 'Woman, behold your son.' And then, 'Son, behold your mother.'

I was aware of arms around me. John, the one they called The Beloved, was there, with me. Behold. My son. Who was my son? My son, my son was dying. And yet, the arms of another son surrounded me, supported me. *‘Whoever does the will of God.’* Even in that dark night of grief, a light was beginning to dawn.

And then a blaze of light - Easter light. Mary, the one called Magdalene, she came running with the news. The tomb was empty and - she has seen him!

I take a deep breath - and take on the world, once again. Let them gaze at me with disbelief -*He lives!* I know it beyond all knowing. And because he lives, I know he was right. It took time for the truth he spoke to seep through the pain and the grief. *‘Who are my brothers and my sisters, my mother?’* Who are my sons and my daughters? *‘Whoever does the will of God.’* That is the realization that transformed me! He was showing me the way to let go, and receive something more. Wasn’t that so often at the heart of his message?

Who am I, you ask? I am a mother who had a mother’s hopes and dreams, of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. A mother who felt she had a *right and a responsibility* to demand that her son come home, come to his senses, be the son she had dreamed he would be – the long-awaited Messiah king, who would sit on the throne of David forever, and she, perhaps the Queen Mother? If I am honest...

I’ve let all that go because he was right. The definition of family which is simply biological or legal can hinder, even obstruct the coming of the Kingdom. I almost did. But, even beyond that, I needed to recognize such definitions exclude those who no longer have those ties, and can cause deep pain for those whose family relations were destructive, or manipulative. He was right – true family transcends our traditional definitions.

So, I am reaching out now, joining hands with brothers and sisters, sons and daughters who believe, who strive to live as he taught us to live, who try to love as he loved. I am waiting with them now, my family in Jerusalem, for the coming of his spirit which he has promised to send.

You could reach out, too. Whether you are here today with a family or alone, if you feel comfortable doing so, reach out and take the hand of the one on your right and your left. Do it now. Know that this one *can* be your mother, your father, your sister, or brother, your son, your daughter. Why? Because we all belong to the One God who was there to hear our bawling cry and who has promised to be there with us when we have breathed our last. Welcome to the Family of God!”

(This message was begun by Richard A. Rhem, Minister of Preaching. The message continued in dramatic narrative by Colette V. DeNooyer, Minister for Children.)

