

John 20:1-2, 11-18

We've all heard of "Christmas in July," but Easter? We should not be surprised that the Gospel reading for today is John's Easter Gospel, for every Sunday is a celebration of Easter. Today, however, we have this Scripture before us because July 22 is the day the Church has set aside to remember and honor St. Mary Magdalene. This day is not about her...it's about Christ, and what He did for her—which is also what He does for us.

Mary lived in the town of Magdala on the Southwest side of the Sea of Galilee. We know that Jesus drove out seven demons from within her. She was then one of the women who followed Jesus and who were beneath His cross when He died. She was there when He was buried, and here in John 20 we're told that she was one of the three women who went out to the tomb early on Easter morning.

She weeps for she does not know where the body of Jesus is. He stands before her but she does not recognize Him. She thinks He is the gardener. Tenderly He calls her name and at once she rejoices that He is alive. She immediately grasps Him and clings to Him. If your child or grandchild was about to fall off the edge of a cliff, you would reach out and grab him or her and hang on for dear life. And so Mary hangs on to Jesus. She lost Him once in death; she is not about to lose Him again.

For 2,000 years the Church has set the saints before the eyes of her members so that we might be imitators of them. We are not to imitate the people of the world, who live for their own pleasure. We are not to imitate even those within the church who are poor followers of Christ. We imitate the saints who have gone before us, not because their behavior was perfect, but because they loved the Lord and they showed it, and God preserved them in the Faith.

Are you an imitator of Mary Magdalene? She clung tightly to Jesus. To whom or to what do you and I tightly cling? Our money? Our standing with our friends? Our leisure time? If we clung to Jesus as Mary did, our congregation would not have any money problems. If we were imitators of Mary, we would not be ashamed to have our friends know that we are followers loyal to Christ. If we clung to Him like Mary did, we would need extra chairs every Sunday morning, both for Bible Class and for Worship.

Now if you and I are not good imitators of St. Mary then how will our kids and grandkids be as imitators of her? We know the answer to our question because we see the fruits of our sinfulness very clearly in the lives of those who imitate us. We wouldn't hesitate to pull our dear ones up from the edge of a cliff; then why don't we pull those same dear ones to Jesus by our good example?

But having said this, we may be a little confused by Jesus' response to Mary. "Do not cling to Me," He told her, "For I have not yet ascended to My Father." And if we're confused, think of how Mary felt. Why would Jesus say, "Don't cling to Me?" We have no other Savior to hold on to. No one else suffered, died, and rose again for us. Jesus was everything to Mary. Why did He push her away? She may have wanted to respond with Ruth's words to Naomi: "Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from you; where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay." Naomi finally gave in and allowed Ruth to go with her; but not Jesus. He was insistent that Mary stop holding on to Him. Why?

At a previous congregation I received a phone call one day telling me that a member of the church had just died. As I entered the home I saw the wife of the man who had died sitting next to him, holding his hand. This was not unusual except that she did not move from his side. Even after the funeral director arrived an hour later and told her that he needed to take the body, she refused to let go of his hand. It was important for me to assure her that she was not losing him by letting him go. I pointed her to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper where, I reminded her, when she communed with Christ there, her husband would be with her—for Christ brings together the Church in heaven and the Church on earth and He reunites us with those who have gone before us.

Like Mary, this woman did not want to let go. And yet both she and Mary needed to do that very thing—not to lose the one they were holding on to, but to have them again. She would be with her husband again in heaven; and even before then, where heaven and earth meet—in the Sacrament of the Altar. And Mary would have Jesus again, for after He ascended to His Father He would come to her with His body and blood in the Sacrament, and whenever His Word was purely preached and taught into her ears.

Jesus truly did want Mary to cling to Him, but not there in the garden; not there outside the tomb. He wanted Mary to cling to Him as often as He came to her in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. He wanted Mary to hold fast to Him whenever His Word of Life was preached by her pastor. We abide in Jesus not by holding on to His hairy legs and feet as Mary was doing, but by opening our ears to His Word and our mouth to His Sacrament. In this we become imitators of St. Mary Magdalene—by holding fast to the Word of Life.

We think that we have it tough to have to sit for an hour and listen to a man in a white robe speak to us. Think of Mary. For many months she was used to sitting at the feet of Jesus listening to the Son of God Himself speak to her the words that are Spirit and Life. And now, in forty days, He would ascend into heaven and from then on, she would have to sit and listen to a mere man preach and teach to her the words of God. That's called "walking by faith and not by sight;" to believe that in listening with eager ears to what her pastor was preaching, that that was, in fact, clinging tightly to Jesus.

If this does not describe you; if you are not one who clings to Jesus' preached Word and His body and blood at the altar, repent before it's too late. And oh how we all need to repent! That which we cling to will either save us or destroy us. If we cling to anything in this world, which is passing away, we will perish along with the world—even if what we cling to is good, right, and honest. But Jesus' words will never pass away, and we are saved by holding tightly to them. Mary Magdalene is one of God's heavenly saints not because she rejoiced at seeing Jesus on Easter morning, but because even after she saw Him no more, she clung to Him by gladly hearing His Word.

That same Word is for you today. The very same Jesus, who tenderly spoke Mary's name to her, speaks your name today—the name He gave you in your baptism: Child of God, one of God's saints, one of His dear forgiven ones. Jesus does not push you away. He is here for you. He comes to you through your ears with His tender words of pardon. He does not condemn you for being a poor imitator of His saints. Every one of you He forgives.

When the day came, at my previous congregation, for the funeral of the man whose wife did not want to let him go, what a privilege it was for me to proclaim the good news that her husband was in heaven because Jesus clung tightly to him. First in his baptism and throughout his life as he heard Jesus' words and received His body and blood — it was his Savior who was holding on tightly to him, even unto death.

And also for you. It matters not how strong or weak your hands are to grasp Christ, because His hands were pierced for you, and those are the strong hands which have you in their grasp. And even though our faith may be weak and frail, it is Jesus who will not let you go. He does not grasp you through your actions and efforts and decisions. He calls to you through the Word which He speaks into your ears, and through that Word of Life He holds on tightly to you.

There is no secret passage into heaven. It's all about Jesus and gladly hearing His Word, for in His Word and Sacraments He draws you to Himself in love so that on the day you die, your loved ones do not need to, with weeping eyes, frantically try to hold on to you. Their comfort and hope will be in the knowledge that Jesus, in His Word, held you tightly in life and in death. Amen.