

Date: April 20, 2014
Scriptures: Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-18
Title: Holding On and Letting Go

It was a tumultuous week.
I was among the ones,
 who followed Jesus into Jerusalem.
What a triumphal entry it was.
People lined the road
 wildly waving palm branches
 and cheering.
For several days afterwards,
 Jesus taught his disciples and the crowd.
Thursday evening,
 while we were at table,
 he put on an apron
 and washed our feet.
At first, Peter resisted
 and then insisted.
Returning to the table,
 Jesus told us that one of the people there
 would soon betray him.
Most of us were so stunned,
 we could scarce take it in,
 but Peter, ever ready to respond,
 asked "Who, Master?"
A short while later, Judas left.
We thought he had gone to buy supplies for the Feast.
Little did we know
 the true reason for his departure.

Afterward, Jesus resumed his teaching.
He taught long into the night.
He spoke of going away
 and loving one another as he loved us
 and the coming of the Helper.
So many things he said to us
 we could scarce take it all in.
Right before we all went

to the Garden of Gethsemane,
Jesus prayed for us.
What a beautiful prayer it was.
Jesus asked God
to guard us
and make us holy
and fill us with God's love.
It was there in the garden
that the desecration started.
Led by Judas, the disciple who betrayed him,
the Roman soldiers arrested Jesus.
They took him first to the Jewish priests
and then to the Roman governor, Pilate.
Pilate condemned Jesus to death.
He seemed not to want to issue the decree.
But, finally, after much persuasion,
he acquiesced.

We three Mary's ~
his mother, Mary,
his maternal aunt, Mary,
and I, Mary Magdalene ~
followed behind Jesus
as he carried his cross to Golgotha,
also known as Skull Hill.
We watched as the soldiers
drove the nails into his hands and feet.
What agony it was for him
and us who loved him.
We stood there through the heat of the day,
powerless to do anything but stand with him.
Shortly before he died,
Jesus entrusted his mother and the Beloved Disciple
into each other's love and care.
Following his death,
Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body
and along with Nicodemus
wrapped it in linen and spices
and laid it in a tomb

newly hewn and so never used.
We watched as they sealed the tomb
and walked away

By then, it was sundown,
the beginning of the Sabbath,
and all we could do was go home and wait.

So that is what I did;
I went home.

I felt lost and alone.

My bones ached,
and there was such pain in my heart
I could hardly breathe.

I could not imagine life without Jesus in it.
If someone you love has ever died,
you know the sense of utter desolation
that comes upon you.

Ever so slowly,
Friday became Saturday ,
and after what seemed like an eternity
Saturday became Sunday.

Before the sun crested the horizon,
I left the house
and headed to the tomb.

I went alone,
for no one was out and about.

Walking quickly, I soon arrived at the garden.

My steps slowed
as I drew near Jesus' tomb.

Although I had been with him Friday,
part of me resisted coming face to face
with the stark finality of his death.

Drawing nearer, I saw the tomb
and my mind exploded.

The stone sealing it had been rolled away,
and all I could think of was grave robbers!

Immediately, I took off and began running

to the place where Peter and the Beloved Disciple
were staying.
Breathless, I told them what I had seen
and they started running
Later the Beloved Disciple told me
he had arrived at the tomb first
but waited for Peter to go in.
Without pausing at the entrance,
Peter walked into the tomb
and then the Beloved Disciple stepped inside.
Seeing that Jesus' body was gone,
they returned home.
I met them on my way back.
Neither said a word.
Peter looked at me and shrugged his shoulders;
the other, deep in thought, just stared at me.

Returning to the tomb,
I stood outside weeping.
Finally, steeling myself,
I looked inside.
What I saw should have sent me running home,
but I was beyond shock.
What would have seemed strange then
no longer did.
The two angels asked me why I was weeping.
I told them straightaway,
"They took my master,
and I do not know where to find him."
Isn't that the way it always is
when someone we love dies?
We're so very confused
and don't know for sure
where to find them.
Even if we believe they are with God
where is God,
and how do we find the way?

Before they had a chance to respond,

I heard something moving behind me.
So I turned around
and saw a man standing there.
Strangely, he asked me the very same question
the angels asked,
 "Woman, why do you weep?"
Thinking he was the gardener
and perhaps had moved Jesus' body,
 I asked him if he knew where it was.
Such a strange morning. . . .
And then Gardner responded,
 "Mary."
Immediately, I knew!
Knew Jesus was standing there before me,
and we were seeing each other face to face.
What a glorious moment it was!
 I reached out to touch him.
I wanted to grab hold of him
and never let him go.
Taking a step back to stop me,
he put up his hand and said,
 "Do not hold onto me,
 for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

"For I have not yet ascended to the Father."
How I have pondered those words
 through the years.
Clearly, Jesus was on his way to his Father
and did not want me to impede his progress.
Yet, I see now
 that his words also carried
 a very important message for me and you
 and all who seek to follow him.

Holding on . . . it's something we,
 the adam of the earth,
 do well.
We cling to so many things.
And there are many things to which to cling ~

loving helpmates,
our children,
family and friends,
life-giving values and behaviors.

But, there are other things
to which we cling that do not foster life,
neither our life,
nor other people's lives,
nor the life of the community.

We cling to fear, guilt, grief;
to anger, resentment, prejudice;
to behaviors that hurt
others and ourselves.

These old behaviors and ways of being
become cocoons
from which it is difficult,
if not impossible, to escape.

They stunt our spiritual growth.
They keep us
from becoming the people God creates us to be
and doing all God intends us to do.

They keep us
from becoming something beautiful
in God's garden of life.

Isn't that something we all want?
To be something beautiful?

Now I see
that Jesus is the gardener of our souls.
He comes
bringing with him new life, new creation
as he did in the Garden of Eden.

He comes to make all things beautiful.
If we are to become something beautiful,
we have to open our hands and let go,
for only in letting go
can we take hold of Jesus' hand.

I say to you this morning,

none of us knows where life will lead us.
But, we do know Jesus walks with us
and all along the way
faithfully tends the garden of our souls.
In the same way,
none of us knows where God is
or how to find our way.
But, Jesus knows the way,
and he will lead us there.
This I know! This I believe!
He lived that fateful day,
he lives still,
and he will live
through all eternity!
As we share this great, good news
both with our mouths and our actions,
we do as Jesus instructed me so long ago ~
we go and tell.
Our testimony is the eternal music of the spheres
and beautiful to God's ears.
So this day and evermore,
Let us go and tell,
"Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!"
Glory! Alleluia! Amen!