

Ever coming toward us: John 20:1-18

by [Frank G. Honeycutt](#) in the [April 7, 2009](#) issue

In his collection of poems titled *After the Lost War*, Andrew Hudgins chronicles the life of a Confederate soldier during and just after the Civil War. In “What Light Destroys,” the soldier fondly recalls a camping trip he once took with his four sons. One particular night the boys caught fireflies, pinched them in half and smeared their fingernails with the glow of the bugs. His sons took great delight in running through the dark woods, waving their hands.

All the main characters in John’s version of the first Easter are running as the narrative opens. We’re told that it was “still dark.” These runners surely looked like lightning bugs flitting through the trees—alive with hope, all three.

Back and forth poor Mary runs. “They’ve taken the Lord!” she breathlessly reports. The men take off and look into the tomb. One believes. Both curiously return to their homes and go back to bed. But not Mary. She stays—and weeps. The details just don’t add up for her. These little bits of peek-a-boo evidence: morsels of bread dropped along a path for a child lost in the woods—the on-and-off light of a firefly guiding the way. Here. Gone. Here. Gone. Missing body. Folded grave clothes. Couple of angels. Only the gardener. Here a glimpse, there a peek. Here. Gone.

Rembrandt was so fascinated with the slippery details of this hide-and-seek Easter that he painted John’s version of the resurrection at least six different times. In 1638, he painted the moment that Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener. Our Lord, who resembles a pirate in the painting, is wearing a broad-brimmed hat and carries a shovel. He appears to be enjoying the charade.

When Mary finally recognizes Jesus, she starts to embrace him. She’s so happy that I think she probably bends forward and tries to plant one right on his kisser. “Do not hold on to me, Mary, because I have not yet ascended to my Father.” It’s hard to imagine Jesus not hugging somebody. But he says right out: “Don’t touch me. Hands off now.” It seems like Jesus is a firefly again. Here. Gone.

There have been several explanations for this behavior down through the centuries. Try these three for starters: 1) Jesus’ wounds were still sore. You wouldn’t want to

handle him with anything but kid gloves at this point. 2) Jesus was really saying something like, “No need to cling to me, Mary. I’ll be around for 40 more days, and we’ll have plenty of time to get reacquainted.” 3) My personal favorite: since the story painstakingly mentions that his grave clothes are neatly folded in a little pile back at the tomb, some have concluded that Jesus now appeared in the “resurrected altogether” and was simply being modest with Mary.

I don’t put much stock in any of these attempts to explain Jesus’ refusal of Mary’s embrace. He is trying to tell Mary that he won’t be around anymore in the same way. Things have changed. “Don’t hold on to me. Don’t pin me down in the past.” In a way, we all want to touch Jesus.

Wouldn’t it be great if Jesus came back and appeared on *60 Minutes*? Then everybody could be absolutely sure. “Tell us how it was when you were dead, sir,” Mike Wallace would say. We get glimpses, but they sometimes seem as elusive as fireflies. This is often the nature of faith—Jesus alive inside our lives, sometimes murky but consistently blinking.

Several years ago our family drove south from Virginia to meet other family members in Mars Hill, North Carolina, just above Asheville. A Subway restaurant is there, perched high above the four-lane. At a vantage point just below the restaurant is a grassy place out of the wind. You can look down on the highway from that height and watch northbound traffic coming toward you. The day was winding down. It was in that twilight time, so beautiful, between fading light and approaching darkness. My son Lukas and I settled into the hill and watched for the car that would bring our relatives to us.

Below us, I spied a small family cemetery, almost overgrown. We walked down the hill and read the old stones. About 30 people were buried there, individuals and families from another time. We talked about what life must have been like in the mountains—the challenges, the despair and joy. Lukas found a smaller stone. I watched him slowly work out the child’s age in his mind. “Dad, she was just two months old,” he said. “February to April, 1837.” We wondered what happened to the little girl, how she might have died. We sat among the old stones and waited quietly for the car coming up the highway. Some headlights were starting to come on, blinking in the distance.

As we sat there, I could not help thinking of Mary Magdalene—a woman whose faith was born in a cemetery so long ago. She discovered that even though she desperately wanted to, she could not hold Jesus anymore. He was alive and loose in the world. She could not pin him down to a certain place, a specific time. Now he was Lord of all places, all times.

None of us can hold him in the way Mary wanted. We can know him, though, alive inside our lives. We can feast on his Easter promise. We can look into the distance, watch for his veiled light, and trust.

Trust that he is ever coming toward us.