

Don't hold on (John 20:1-18)

Christ's invitation to new life is almost always unfamiliar and surprising, even disconcerting.

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What can new life and resurrection promise mean when so many churches are struggling and declining?

The people in your pews are almost certainly aware of this reality, even if it's not often spoken of. An Easter sermon that is full of gospel hope but also honest about the reality of church decline might be healing, clarifying, and grounding for your congregation.

One way you might do this is to preach about Mary Magdalene and her encounter at the tomb with the risen Christ. Peter and the beloved disciple run off and go home while she lingers, grieving at the tomb. In what ways has your congregation changed since the pandemic? How might you and your people be lingering and grieving? What is it like to witness a changing society where church is less and less central to the communal and spiritual life of most people?

Mary's lingering and grieving over the loss of her teacher and friend—and surely also her uncertainty about her future—is met by the presence of Christ. However, she doesn't recognize him at first. Christ's presence among us might not always be obvious. Christ's invitation to new life is almost always unfamiliar and surprising, even disconcerting. We may overlook or miss Christ among us altogether.

But then Jesus calls her by name: “Mary!” And she knows him right away. How might Jesus be calling your congregation by name, inviting you to know him and dwell in him?

When Mary recognizes Jesus, she is so excited that it sounds as though she wants to *grab* him. But Jesus says to her, “Don’t hold on to me, Mary.”

Later, Jesus will say the opposite to Thomas—inviting Thomas to touch his wounds. But Mary’s response of grasping is different from Thomas’s doubt and skepticism. “Holding on” or clasping to Jesus isn’t the same as following him. As much as Mary Magdalene loves him, as faithful and passionate as she is, he says to her, basically, “Let go.”

Sometimes we may hold onto Jesus too tightly, also, so that we get stuck. We put Jesus in a box instead of letting him lead the way or challenge us. Jesus becomes a source of safety and certainty instead of lighting a way ahead of us and inviting us to take risks for the kingdom of God. We see what we want to see instead of what God is inviting us to become. How could your congregation be holding on too tightly to Jesus or their conception of Jesus?

Perhaps, in many of our churches, we also need to hear Jesus say, *Don’t hold on to me.*

Don’t put me in a box. Don’t look back at our past with nostalgia. I call you ahead—through my resurrection, to a new reality.

How might Jesus be inviting you or your congregation to let go of him—or some idea of him—and enter into new life?

The tomb is empty. Death is conquered. There is a new world, the kingdom of God, always in our midst. Jesus goes ahead of us. Alleluia!