

SERMON BY REV W HUIZINGA

ON EASTER SUNDAY

ON JOHN 20:16-17

LITURGY

Votum and Salutation

Psalm 16:1,3

The Ten Words of the Covenant

Psalm 16:2

Prayer for the Opening of God's Word

Thankoffering

Psalm 16:4,5

Read - John 20

Text - John 20:16-17

Sermon

STOP CLINGING TO ME!

- 1. The reality of Easter.***
- 2. The rule of Easter.***
- 3. The relationship after Easter.***

Psalm 118:4,5,6

Pastoral Prayer

Hymn 50:1,5

Benediction

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ crucified but risen from the dead.

Many are inclined to say of Mary Magdalene what the angel said to Mary, the mother of Jesus, “blessed are you among women.” For did she not witness everything of the resurrection all at once? She saw the empty grave and the linen grave-cloths. The angels in dazzling apparel appeared to her too. And they spoke to her. Then Jesus appeared to her but she did not recognize him. Finally Jesus makes her realize that He is not the gardener but Jesus who is alive. At the end of the scene Jesus disappears. What a great privilege Mary of Magdala enjoyed!

Other evangelists do not mention this resurrection appearance separately. Only John records it. Why Jesus chose to show himself to Mary first of all is hard to explain. She is not the most important among the women. We might have expected then to have Jesus appear to Mary his mother. But Jesus has his own set of priorities. He knows who needs his attention most. Besides, He is not interested only in one individual as we will see, but in his disciples as a whole.

He had told them that in “a little while I will see you no more.” That time had come. Death and burial had snatched Jesus from them. Grievous mourning overtook them all. The Shepherd had been struck and the sheep were scattered. Meanwhile the world rejoiced. But the sorrow would turn to joy. For again, after another little while and they would see Him. Easter! It would be like a woman who joyously marvels at the sight of her newborn. That bundle of wonder makes all the labour, all the pain and sorrow disappear. So also the hearts of the disciples would rejoice. This would be true for Mary Magdalene as well as the others.

I preach to you the Word of our Lord about the Easter message of the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene under this *THEME:

STOP CLINGING TO ME!

This exhortation demonstrates:

- 1. The reality of Easter.***
- 2. The rule of Easter.***
- 3. The relationship after Easter.***

1. The reality of Easter.

If Mary was privileged, it was because of her need. An unbelievably deep sorrow blanketed her. She seems to float in a world of her own, oblivious to her surroundings. Remember that this is Mary of Magdala out of whom Jesus cast seven demons. She is probably the

woman who is called “the sinner” in Luke 7. Weeping, she washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and wiped his feet with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with an alabaster flask of ointment. Jesus had explained to Simon the Pharisee, the host, that this was because of the deep thankfulness for the forgiveness of her sins which were many.

Mary had remained with Jesus along with the other women to serve Him. Christ’s death must have deeply shocked this Mary. Tears fill her eyes and blind her vision. After seeing the empty tomb she runs to John and Peter. Her only thought is, “they have taken my Lord.” The empty tomb has no other message for her at that point.

After the disciples left Mary stooped to look into the tomb and she saw the two angels, strategically placed one at the head and one at the feet of where Jesus had laid. It was as though they urged her to look at that empty space between them. Look, He is not here, He is risen. Look at the cloths rolled in orderly fashion. The tomb was not ransacked and robbed. No, He has risen. Yet her eyes remain blurred with tears and grief. Again, she only laments –

Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him. (vs.13).

Mary did not even see a mystery. The appearance of the angels did not even seem to terrify her. Their words of compassion did not stir her. All her attention became riveted on Jesus whom they had crucified. But how often do tears shed in sorrow, not by God’s power turn into joy on the morrow?

Then comes her encounter with Jesus Himself. But again she fails to see the significance of this visit. For not only were her reddened eyes unable to discern who this was, but her eyes of faith had not been looking for this wonder. She is totally unprepared for the miracle of Easter, even though Jesus had foretold how He would rise on the third day. All her thoughts again focus on the dead Lord. Mistaking the man for the gardener (for the tomb was located in a garden close to Golgotha), she again asks where he had laid the dead body of her Lord.

Now some say that Jesus must have worn different clothes, because the soldiers had divided his clothes and had cast lots for his seamless garment. Therefore Mary could not recognize him. That happens sometimes to us even with those we know well. Yet this cannot be the main reason, which is plainly that Mary does not look for a living Christ, but a dead Jesus.

Once more a voice compassionately asks her, *woman, why are you weeping; whom do you seek?* Our merciful high-priest allows her to vent her pain by asking, *woman, why are you weeping?* Yet He also puts things into focus by asking, *whom do you seek?*

Indeed, whom does she seek - a dead Jesus? It seems that Mary of Magdala is one of the most grief-stricken disciples and therefore one of most difficult to convince that Jesus is alive.

To persuade her Jesus uses her mother tongue, Aramaic. He calls her by her Aramaic name, *Mariam*. How joyously this bleating sheep then runs to her Shepherd. The rescued sheep recognizes the voice of her Good Shepherd who had laid down his life for her.

She runs to Him and throws her arms around Him, spilling another flood of tears, this time in joy. She is now like the woman who has delivered a child. All is joy. Her one response is *Rabbouni*. She too used the Aramaic so familiar to her.

That title is significant. You know that the usual Hebrew title for the teachers was *rabbi*. This title was rarely used of human teachers but there are instances in Aramaic literature from this period that it was used as an address of God in prayer. Moreover, this form, *Rabbouni*, carries the character of *my dear or loved Teacher*. So Mary or Mariam reserves the highest title of honour for her Master. On the other hand we should be careful in equating this title with the confession of Thomas who in faith confessed the risen Jesus to be *my God and my Lord*. For in Mark 10:51 the blind Bartimaeus asks Jesus, *Rabbouni, let me receive my sight*. There the same title is used, and it is questionable whether Bartimaeus saw Jesus as Lord and God.

What we can conclusively say is that all ignorance, all unbelief and all sorrow vanish in the face of the living Master. Joy floods the soul of Mary. Only the unbinding from the seven demoniac powers equalled this joy.

Easter is an event of joy. Our faith is therefore predominantly one of joy. We may grieve over our sins and the miseries in our lives and in those around us, but God has given the joy of the risen Christ, so that our joy may be full. Easter is a reality. For John recorded this for us so that we would believe, and by believing have joy and life.

2. The rule of Easter.

At first Jesus has to bridge chasms of blindness and sorrow, drawing Mary to Himself. Afterwards He has to distantiate Himself from her. Now He replaces the gap by withdrawing Himself. Christ announces the rule of Easter - *stop clinging to Me*.

Is there an inconsistency in the actions of Jesus? For when Jesus meets the other women who had left the tomb on the instructions of the angel, he allows them to come up to Him and to take hold of his feet and to worship Him (Matthew 28:9). Then Jesus did not forbid them to cling to Him. Moreover, Thomas was specifically invited to come and to touch Jesus. Yet Mariam is told, *do not touch Me*.

The meaning of this command cannot be therefore that Jesus shrank back from any physical contact. Also it cannot mean what many have tried to make out of the contact between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Many films such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and others make Mary Magdalene say at Christ's death, *He's a man, just a man, and I've had so many men before*. That is blasphemous slander for which those responsible will have to give an account.

No, Jesus relates this command to the fact He is ascending to His Father, as He had foretold in his farewell address to them. Even then it is hard to pinpoint the exact meaning of Christ's command to stop clinging to Him. Is she not to worship Him till He is ascended? That would not make sense seeing that the other women were allowed to do so. Could it mean that only the hands of faith may hold Jesus? Yet that is not specified either.

It is best to see this order as a correction of Mary's wrong attitude. She clung to Him as though now she need never miss Him again. All would return to the normal state as before his crucifixion. She would never let Him go. Never did she want to relive that agony. Since He had cast out the seven demons from her, she had faithfully remained at his side. She would follow him always. The sabbath had been long and torturous. How she had longed to go and be at his grave, where his memories could best be relived.

That she tenaciously clung to Him therefore means that Easter will be a standstill. To Mary Golgotha was a step backward which Easter undid. Good Friday was not the greatest deed of deliverance of mankind for her. That understanding came later on. So you can understand that for her the living Jesus meant life could go on as before. That was wrong. For there is not only a history of revelation but a progressive history of redemption. God's work does not stand still, but moves on in spite of the enmity of the Devil.

Brothers and sisters, we may feel a trickle of jealousy when we read our text. Who would not love to have had Mary's experience? Many today try indeed to relive these ancient events. Some even carry crosses with bleeding backs and a crown of thorns on their head. Or some watch one of the passion films.

In the Middle Ages they watched the passion plays in the marketplaces. They kept huge crowds entertained.

In all these cases people want to re-live the blood during his trial and death, the bitter loss, as well as the excitement at the empty grave.

Even today many ministers re-dramatize the events of salvation so we can feel the suspense. Yet, if this is merely a nostalgic longing for the good old past, it is as wrong as Mary's clinging to the risen Jesus. For God marches on in victory from Calvary to Easter to Pentecost to Christ's coming in glory. We do not need to turn the clock back to try to establish the factuality of Easter as Jesus had to do for Mary. Christ is not here but in heaven from where He comes to judge the living and the dead. Therefore the church of Christ must stop clinging to the events of salvation as though we can re-enact them today. No, we thankfully stand in the flowing stream of redemption. Let's not try to stop the current but let the current sweep us to its destination. That is the rule of Easter.

3. The relationships after Easter.

Easter was the feast of renewed friendship for Mary Magdalene. Had

Jesus not called his disciples friends? That is a great privilege.

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you (John 15:13-15).

To be the friends of Christ for whom He laid down his life is a true blessing. A servant knows little of the Master's plans. A child hears little bits and pieces of the father's thoughts and plans. But a friend shares all your hopes and plans. Jesus calls you friends. To Mary He made known the plan of ascending to his Father. He withholds nothing from her.

Yet at Easter Jesus confirms a still more wonderful blessing. While Mary called the Master, *Rabbouni*, Jesus calls her and his disciples *brothers*. That may not strike us, since we are used to this ecclesiastical parlance. But in the Gospel Jesus hardly ever calls them *brothers*, but rather *my disciples*. In fact, if we had not read that Mary indeed goes to *the disciples*, we might have thought that Jesus sent her to his blood brothers who needed to be brought to faith.

This blessing of being called *brothers* by Jesus is accented in his words, *I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*. Notice how Jesus includes us in the family of God. I call you *brothers*, Jesus says, because God is not only my Father and God, but your Father and God too. The death of Christ pays for our transgressions. His blood covers our iniquity. Through that ransom price God adopts as his sons, and if sons, then heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. Good Friday lays the foundation for our adoption as the sons of God. At Easter God legally declares the sentence to be over, and so releases Jesus the Mediator. On Easter God thus justifies us, declares us free from guilt. Innocent! God accepts us as his children. This tremendous covenant blessing comes out so clearly in Jesus' words - *I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*.

But there is more. Jesus binds himself to his church. Though He ascends to his Father, Jesus keeps addressing the church as his *brothers*.

Is this not hard to believe? That Jesus is not ashamed to call us *brothers*, is unexpected. For remember how childishly the disciples had acted. They had refused to believe the messages of the women. They were all old wives' tales. And had the disciples not fled into the night, ashamed of their Lord? Yet here they receive the message, *I go to my Father and your Father, my God and your God*. His finished atonement confirms this promise.

But we must not forget that Jesus is still the Son of God in a unique manner. He does not say, *I go to **our** Father and to **our** God*, but to

my Father and **your** Father, to **my** God and **your** God. Even though Jesus calls us brothers, there is an obvious distinction between Jesus and us. He is the natural and eternal Son of God while we are adopted.

Mary did not have a very good eye for this brotherhood of believers. She acts too much as an individual. While the other women came as a group, she stands here by herself. She goes off on her own to Peter and John. She comes back by herself. She strikes us as a loner. In this first resurrection story we normally see the disciples come or go in groups. But not Mary Magdalene! Jesus therefore specifically charges her to *go to my brothers*. She may announce to the family of faith the coming ascension of the Lord to his Father. Let us too expect to receive the riches of the covenant of grace not as individuals but as members of the family of God.

Easter is the feast of life and joy. It speaks of the restored fellowship with God through the death of Christ. God accepts us as just and righteous. He adopts us as sons and daughters. He has become our God and our Father through Jesus Christ. The almighty Creator is now our Father. What progress and what hope! Our older Brother has blazed a trail for us to the mansions of God in heaven. As the pioneer of our salvation He went first and He assures us that we will arrive too. If He lives, so shall we.

But let's not long for the past by clinging to past events, but treasure the past in order to live for the future. *Stop clinging to Me*, says Jesus. Instead, press on for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Keep running the race of faith, till Jesus brings the climax. You have every reason to stride forward courageously, for Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and He rules from on high. Amen.