

SOMETHING TO HOLD ONTO

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Exodus 19:9-23; John 20:1-18

“Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold onto me..’”

John 20:17

It’s a remarkable and unforgettable sight: a cathedral in flames. Last Monday I watched it live, on television, as did millions around the world: the burning of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Remarkable, too, has been the outpouring of support from all over the world: the concern, the prayers, the financial generosity.

The building is, of course, one of the great treasures of Western civilization, not to mention a symbol of unity for the French nation. But it’s more than that. Notre Dame is a tourist magnet, yes, but it’s also a working church: a place of worship.

France is one of the most secular countries on earth. The portion of the population that’s in church on any given Sunday is very small: about 6%, by some estimates. So, I was more than a little surprised, watching those news reports, to see the people of Paris standing out in the street, gazing in horror at the conflagration. What surprised me was not that they were there, but what they were doing. They were singing. It wasn’t the *Marsellaise* they were singing — the

national anthem. They were singing hymns.

Now why, I asked myself, would such a secular people as the French be so visibly touched by the burning of a Christian church — however grand and historic it may be? More to the point, why would they respond with the singing of hymns: songs that at least some of that crowd may not have sung since their childhood?

At least part of the answer, I think, is what church buildings symbolize, even to those who seldom cross the threshold. Even here, in this land, there are a lot more people who *call* themselves Christian than who actively practice their faith. The thought of losing a great touchstone of faith, like *Notre Dame de Paris*, brings a deep sense of grief.

A cathedral is something you can touch. Run your hand across the ancient stones. Marvel at the patterns of stained-glass light painted on the stone floor by the sunbeams. Take a seat in a shadowed corner and listen to the organist rehearsing. Light a candle and watch the flame leap and dance. The reality of God is such an abstraction, but in a medieval cathedral, sensory experiences await — things you can see and hear and touch: and in the wafer of the mass, even taste.

Sometimes, in our journey of faith, we yearn for something to hold onto.

As do Mary Magdalene and her fellow disciples on the day of resurrection. Remember what their experience is like, at first: dreadful loss and emptiness. They go to the tomb and look inside. They discover, to their consternation, that nothing's there. The tomb is empty: or nearly so. Just the graveclothes, neatly folded.

That in itself is a mystery worthy of a detective novel. Had someone stolen their Lord's body away — the most likely hypothesis — those grave-robbers would not have carefully stripped a putrefying corpse of the one material between it and their own hands.

But even in the face of such baffling mystery, scripture tells us they “saw and believed.” Believed what? It's not entirely clear. Peter and the beloved disciple — who's probably John himself — don't go fetch the others and tell them the good news. John says they went back home. Having seen evidence of the greatest news the world has ever known, they say, *“Isn't that interesting? I wonder what's for breakfast?”*

We need to consider more carefully what John means by “saw.” There are three different Greek words in this passage meaning “to see” — but you'd never know that from the English translation. The first one John uses to describe the

response of both Mary Magdalene and the beloved disciple. Mary sees the stone rolled away, and the beloved disciple sees the linen cloths lying there. The Greek word is *blepo*, the ordinary word for seeing. It's a brief glance, no different from thousands of things each of us glance at, every day.

Then, Peter catches up with them — he's a little slower on his feet — and actually goes into the tomb. He, too, sees the linen cloths, but this time the word is *theoreo*. It's a word you may even recognize, because it's where our word "theory" comes from.

Peter examines this phenomenon of the neatly-folded graveclothes and, like any good scientist or detective, his gaze lasts a little longer. He theorizes about it. He ponders its meaning. That's the second word for seeing in this passage.

Evidently, something sinks in now for John, the beloved disciple. John recalls own his experience by saying he, too, "saw and believed." There's yet another Greek word at work: *eidon*. That word's translated many different ways into English: "to look," "to see," "to experience," "to perceive," "to take note."

There are times we see, and there are other times we *really* see. There are times when, in conversation with someone about a difficult topic, you or I may respond by saying, "I see" — meaning, I comprehend.

John doesn't tell us Peter "saw and *believed*." Peter's still engaged in

theorizing, in wondering, as he makes his way home from the tomb. Maybe that's how *you've* come here today: "*Well, here's a fascinating mystery,*" you say to yourself, "*the story of a man who came back from the dead. It's a well-attested story, a story the church has been proclaiming for centuries, but there's no hard evidence. The evidence is all circumstantial. I think I'll keep on wondering.*"

But there are others who see differently, as John does in our story: that more focused sense, as in the Greek word, *eidon*. There are those who say of this good news of resurrection, "I see," meaning "I get it!"

Well, what is it that makes the difference? What is it that moves people to go from "Isn't this a fascinating theory?" to "There's a truth here so compelling, I'm willing to stake my life on it"?

John provides us with the answer. The answer lies in what happens next.

It's Mary Magdalene who's the first to fully realize it. Significantly, Mary doesn't join the other two in going back home. She sticks around the cemetery. Who knows what she's expecting to happen?

She's weeping outside the tomb, then turns and looks into it once again. There she sees two angels. Angels! The Greek word for seeing here is not *blepo*, the brief glance; nor is it yet *eidon*, seeing with comprehension. It's *theoreo*:

seeing in a deep way, and wondering.

Who are these two people clad in white, and what are they doing in her master's empty tomb?

“Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask.

How can she even answer the question? How can she, in a few words, explain the utter desolation she's feeling?

Mary supplies the simplest answer that comes to mind: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Of course, you know what happens next. She turns around and sees Jesus, but doesn't know yet it *is* Jesus. She pleads with this mysterious man — if, indeed, he *is* one of the grave-robbers — to return the body to the tomb. But then he calls her by name, and *she knows*.

She flings herself into his arms.

The text doesn't say she does that, but we can infer it from Jesus' instruction: “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

Why does Jesus say that: “Don't hold onto me”? Well, we're not entirely sure. All these centuries later, it's still a bit of a mystery — just as the resurrection itself is still, when you come right down to it, a mystery.

“Do not hold onto me,” he says. Isn’t that what we’re all looking for, this bright morning, something to hold onto? Some bit of evidence, some tangible proof, for what we hope against hope may be true: that death does not have the final word?

My friends, there is something you can hold onto, today. It’s the same proof Mary found of old, that led her to go running off and tell Peter, John and all the others what she’d heard and seen: the thing that made her *apostola apostolorum*, “apostle to the apostles.”

That proof is Jesus himself. It’s not a set of facts. It’s not a file of historical evidence. It’s a person. A relationship. It’s a relationship you or I or anyone else can have, if we but ask him into our lives.

I promise you that, if you do invite him in, and live your days on the strength of this encounter with the resurrected Lord, you *will* have something to hold onto: the living relationship you have with him.

Listen, I can’t explain the resurrection to you. No one can. It’s a singular event, that defies scientific or any other sort of analysis. Even the scientists can’t define a singularity. A singularity, by definition, is something that happens once, never to be repeated. It can’t be recreated in the laboratory, nor studied in the field.

In the world of theoretical physics, there are objects like that — if you can

even call them objects. There are certain sub-atomic particles that burst into existence for a brief instant, but come and go so quickly there's no way to capture or study them. The scientists know of their existence only by the tracks they leave: the ways they influence other particles.

The resurrection is something like that. The raising of a human being from death to life, and from thence to life eternal, is not something anyone has seen nor heard of since. But we can see the tracks, the traces of this resurrection event, across the church and across human history.

If you hold onto anything this day, hold onto Jesus Christ himself. It's not so much *something* we hold onto, as *someone*. Jesus himself describes it best, earlier in the Gospel of John: "I am the resurrection and the life." Not "I was — or will be — resurrected." I *am* the resurrection. If you know me, you know the resurrection also.

But there's another thing in this life you can hold onto. Scripture tells us the body of Christ is still alive and present in this world. "The body of Christ" is the church. It's one thing — and a very important thing — to make a personal commitment to Christ in your heart. But if we don't likewise make a commitment to enter into Christian community through a worshiping congregation, we're very much like those disciples who saw the empty tomb, said "Now isn't that

intriguing?,” then went back home.

Take Mary, instead, as your example. When she witnesses the wonder of her Lord standing before her — living, breathing and embracing her — Mary’s first impulse is to run and tell the others. She seeks out community in Christ.

So, I invite you to know him today, or to renew the relationship you already have. Ask him to take up residence in your heart. Then, go seek out the church. Make Christian community a part of your life. For there’s nothing in this life more worthy of holding onto than our relationship with him, and — through him — with others of like mind and heart.

Let us pray:

**Speak to us, Lord Jesus,
in the stillness,
in the silence,
in the beauty of a spring morning,
bursting with new life.
Set aside our hesitations,
our fears,
our dogmatic demands for proof.
Give us confidence that,
if we step out onto the bridge of faith,
that bridge will hold:
and that, waiting for us on the other side,
will be the one who says,
“Courage, it is I. Be not afraid.”
Amen.**

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