

'Clinging on'

20 4 14

Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
grant that we, being dead to sin
and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with him in glory.

My text may be found in Tom Wright's translation of John 20 and verse 17:

'Don't cling to me.'

Easter Day has dawned. Matthew's account of that first Easter morning is most dramatic. Two Mary's, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Salome, go to the tomb which is being guarded. There's an earthquake and an angel of the Lord appears. The guards are terrified, petrified. The angel speaks to the two Marys, reassuring them and telling them the good news that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Turning to go back, they meet Jesus in the flesh and kneel down to touch his feet.

John's account of that first Easter morning has just Mary Magdalene visiting the tomb. Matthew and Mark have Mary joined by a second Mary. Luke names three women, adding Joanna to the two Marys already mentioned plus an unnamed

number of others. All four accounts agree the good news is that Jesus has risen from the dead and that the grave where he lay is now empty, unoccupied.

Christmas and Easter are the two moments in time when the Christian story expresses three important truths: the Incarnation; the Crucifixion; the Resurrection. Jesus was born; Jesus was killed; Jesus rose again from the dead. The extraordinary claim that Christianity makes is that Jesus was born as all of us are born; that Jesus died as all of us must die; and that Jesus rose again from the dead thereby enabling us one day to be born again.

Resurrection, new life, is essentially the message of Easter and I could stop there but let me briefly focus on a tiny detail, a phrase Jesus says from John's account of the resurrection which personally I find touching in its emotional power – Mary clinging onto Jesus. She thought him dead. She'd seen him die and being laid to rest in the tomb. And just around an hour ago, she'd come to pay her last respects at the tomb itself, only to find the stone rolled away and having got back for Peter and John, they found the tomb empty with the grave clothes on the slab just as if Jesus had slipped out of them, having no further need of them !

In Greek, the word that the King James Bible translates as 'touch', our pew bibles as 'hold on' and Tom Wright as 'cling to' is *απτομαι* (haptomai). Having felt she'd never see Jesus alive again in the flesh, here she is, standing next to him, and she can't stop herself touching him,. Mary wants to hold on to him, her arms around him and never let him go ! And that's what it means to love someone !

Which brings me to my final question this morning about the nature of grief, the loss we feel at the death of a loved one. What is good grief? A public recognition and a personal acceptance that the person we love is dead. It's coming to terms with the awful fact that he or she has died, that they are no longer physically with us. It is expressing what we feel, admitting the truth that they are no longer alongside us to touch us with their daily presence in our lives. And here the words of Jesus, in Greek, *απτομαι* (haptomai) – to touch; to hold on: to cling to – could offer the key to good grief. We can no longer physically touch the one we love but in our mind we can still be in touch by remembering them. We can no longer hold on to them to stop them leaving us but we can still hold their memory dear. We should not try to cling on to them but let them go while still cherishing them in our thoughts and our prayers. Good grief is recalling the dead without recalling them. A paradox, I know, but paradoxically though the two Mary's in Matthew's gospel do kneel to touch Jesus' feet, Mary in John's gospel is told not to hold on to him, not to cling to him for he has to move on. And so must she. And so must we.

And that is the gift of Easter: the promise of life in the world to come. But in the meantime we need to get on with our life in this world and to make good use of whatever time is left to us with or without the ones we love.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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