

“Holding on and Letting Go” GPPC 4-16-17  
Jeremiah 31:1-6, John 20:1-18

A number of years ago when I was serving a church in Pennsylvania, the youth leaders and I took the church’s youth group to Kennywood amusement park near Pittsburgh. Now let it be noted that with the exception of rides that go high, go fast, or spin, I really like amusement parks.

One of the rides at Kennywood was called The Pitt Fall. This ride looked like a space needle, several stories high. In fact, according to the always accurate Wikipedia, when it opened in 1997, The Pitt Fall was the “tallest drop tower in the world.”

Here’s the way the ride worked. Riders took a seat. The ride operator pulled a cushioned bar down to secure each rider. Once everybody was strapped in, the operator pushed a button and you were slowly lifted, feet and legs dangling, up 229 feet to the top. Once you got to the top, you just sat for a few seconds looking at the tiny people below, or scanning the horizon contemplating the meaning of life, or just dreading what came next. And then all of a sudden, you went into a free

Jeff Paschal

fall for 150 feet at 65 miles per hour before the brakes finally caught.

Sounds like great fun, doesn't it? And you know if you did this to your dog or cat, they'd put you in jail.

At any rate, several of the youth and leaders got in line to ride The Pitt Fall. I got in line with them swearing I wasn't going to ride and I was just in line to engage in Christian fellowship. After we waited in line about an hour, I decided to ride too.

Just before it was our turn to get on, another group of people had their turn. But after being strapped in, two teenage girls in the bunch had a change of heart. They began yelling at the ride operator, "We changed our minds! Can we get off?! Can we get off?!" And the operator flashed them a smile and said, "Yeah, you can get off." Then he pushed the button and up they went--screaming all the way. The contraption took the girls to the top and then dropped them, still screaming, to the bottom.

Life is like that, you know. Sometimes when things get scary, we say to God, "Wait! I've changed my mind. Can I get off?!" But there's no getting off. Once we're born, we have to take the ride for as long as it

Jeff Paschal

lasts. But *how* do we take that ride? How do we approach it? That's the question, isn't it?

John says Mary came to the tomb of Jesus on the first day of the week, early in the morning, and saw that the huge stone had been moved from the entrance. So Mary ran to Simon Peter and to the unnamed beloved disciple and announced that the body of Jesus had been taken. Peter and the beloved disciple also ran to the tomb, with the beloved disciple winning that race.

Why all the running? Why not just walk or stroll? Because the body of Jesus, their Lord, was missing. A response was demanded, and it was urgent. And our response to Jesus is also urgent, not to be pushed aside to a time when we are not so busy.

Peter and the beloved disciple launched an investigation. They both took a look in the tomb and at the linen cloths inside. And John says that did it; the beloved disciple "believed." But then John says "they did not understand the scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead." So the beloved disciple believed alright, but we're not exactly sure what he believed. Believed that the body was missing? Believed in

Jeff Paschal

the resurrection? We aren't sure. And John says, "Then the disciples returned to their homes."

Seriously? That's it? Jesus had told them several times that he was going to be killed and then resurrected. They saw his empty tomb with linen wrappings, and then they just went back home. Really?

But Mary Magdalene, who is now known as "the apostle to the apostles" and the first witness to the resurrection, reacted differently. She stayed at the tomb and wept, just as so many of us have stayed at bedsides and gravesides and wept. Mary stayed at the tomb and cried just as we have cried for loved ones who've died. We share a connection with Mary and with each other.

Novelist Cormac McCarthy says, "Those who have suffered great pain of injury or loss are joined to one another with bonds of a special authority...The closest bonds we will ever know are bonds of grief. The deepest community one of sorrow." (Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*, 238.)

Mary is our sister in grief. She stayed and wept because she loved Jesus, and he was dead, and even his body was gone.

Jeff Paschal

Mary is our sister in grief, but Mary is also our sister in another way. As she wept, John says Mary bent down and looked into the tomb. Now Peter and the beloved disciple had already looked and had just seen some linen wrappings. Their investigation was closed and the paperwork filed. So why did Mary look? Why did she do that? Because Mary is also our sister in hope.

Heidi Grogan works with Servants Anonymous Society, an agency that helps women who've been sexually exploited and who are trying to leave the sex-trade. These women have been told they are worthless, trash to be used and thrown away. Grogan and the society use writing and art and scripture and faith to help these women rediscover that they are children of God. Grogan says, "The women at work show me that hope is an act of bravery; it is a decision to not give up when we are utterly without reason to believe things could get better, without resources to improve our own situation." (Heidi Grogan in *Weavings*, Vol. XXVII, Number 2, 25-26.)

Hope is an act of bravery, the decision not to give up when we are utterly without reason to believe things could get better. Mary is our

Jeff Paschal

sister not only in grief but also in hope. She loved enough to grieve and grieved enough to cry. And she was brave and persistent and hopeful enough to stick around and look in the tomb once again. Her reward was to encounter the divine as never before.

John says angels, messengers from God, sat in authority in that tomb, the authority of God's love just as calm as can be. "Woman," they said, "Why are you weeping?" And she repeated the sad story, "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him."

Mary had grief and at least some hope, ("They've taken away my *Lord*," she said). But Mary still did not have fully-formed faith. Faith required a final step.

Mary turned and saw Jesus, but she did not recognize him. He asked her a familiar question. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" And John says she thought he was the gardener. "It's not Jesus; it's the guy who cuts the grass and trims the hedges!"

But then at last one word changed everything. "Mary!" Jesus said. Jesus called her by name. Then Mary knew who he was. Not only her

Jeff Paschal

Lord but also her dear Teacher. Jesus, yet Jesus in a new form of existence. In fact, he told her, “Don’t keep clinging to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

Jesus was resurrected in a new form of existence, an existence not immediately recognizable, but recognizable when he called you by name, when he became personal to you, not merely an abstract concept. But even in his resurrected form, he was not finished. He was going to move to yet another form of resurrected and ascended existence.

It was right for Mary to have faith in Jesus, but she could not cling to her old understanding of him. He wasn’t just a pleasant memory. He was the resurrected Lord who would also become the ascended Lord. He was in time and space, yet no longer constricted by time and space. He was distinct and recognizable when he called Mary by name.

Despite every evidence to the contrary, this resurrection is what we claim for ourselves and those we love too. This outlandish idea that the God who created all that is will also *recreate* all that is, but this time without the brokenness and pain and loss that we now experience. The astonishing notion is that God will *recreate* all that is and we will be

Jeff Paschal

united and reunited in one community of love and in a universe finally made whole.

And with our failures and sins and divisions, maybe one community of love is hard to imagine. So Jesus told Mary this. “But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

Do we catch how radical that statement is? Remember, every one of his disciples abandoned Jesus. So we might well have expected Jesus to say to Mary, “Go tell those no-good cowards I’m finished with you.” We might have expected that.

But instead Jesus said, “Go tell my *brothers* (and scholars say *sisters* are also clearly implied here) Go tell my brothers and sisters I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God.” (Gail R. O’Day and Susan E. Hylen, John, 194.) Jesus did not blame. He forgave. Jesus did not condemn. He pardoned. He loved. These failed disciples were his brothers and sisters. They were beloved children of God. And nothing could ever change that.

Jeff Paschal

I wonder as we look at each other, you and I, if some of us here sometimes feel that somehow we are condemned by God. That we have done something or neglected to do something that has caused us to be removed us from God's care. I wonder.

In the resurrection, God says that is not so. In the resurrection, the God we know in Jesus says, "You are my brothers and sisters. You are precious to me. My loving Parent is your loving Parent. My God is your God. And nothing can ever take you away from my care. Nothing." Do we know that? We can let go of our past failures and sins and divisions, just as God lets go of them.

Life is an exciting and scary ride, isn't it? Once we're born, there's no getting off until we've taken our turn. And as we ride, life is about holding on and letting go. Like Mary, we let go of our old inadequate understandings of Jesus. We let go of fear, at least on our good days we do. We let go of our broken past, our sins and mistakes and divisions. We let go.

But we also hold on. With bravery and persistence we hold on to hope. As Jesus calls us by name and becomes not just a name but a

Jeff Paschal

presence, not just a concept, but a living, growing relationship forged by time and effort, then we hold onto faith. And as we recall the life of Jesus—how he fed the hungry, preached good news to the poor, welcomed the outsider, forgave the sinful, rejected violence, healed the sick, spoke truth to the powerful, brought down the arrogant, and lifted up the humble—as we recall his entire life of love, if he had not been resurrected people might say, “Well, Jesus was just another deluded, do-gooder.” But instead his entire life of love is vindicated in the resurrection. So we also hold onto that pattern of living, that pattern of self-giving love in our own lives.

The more we hold onto faith, hope, and love, the more we loosen our white-knuckle grip on ourselves, fear, and guilt, and we put our hands up in the air and really let go to live with the freedom that comes when we trust in Christ. After all, the resurrection promise is that no matter how high the ride goes, how fast it moves, and how much it spins, each of us finally falls into the arms of God. And there is no better place to fall.

He is risen. He is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen. © Jeff Paschal