

Sermon: Nothing to Hold On To

Scripture: Luke 24:1-12

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Date: April 17, 2022

This past fall our daughters gave Tracy for her birthday tickets to do something she's always wanted to do and that was to jump out of an airplane. The only catch was that they didn't just give Tracy a ticket, they gave her two, one for her husband, that's me, and I've never ever wanted to jump out of an airplane. So we went and tethered to someone who knew what they were doing, thank you God, we climbed up to over 10,000 feet. I was first out with my tether guy and Tracy who was quite cavalier about the whole thing sat behind me and said as she watched me perched on the edge of the plane about to jump that she thought - "aww, look at how terrified he is and he's doing this for me!" That's what she was thinking. I have no idea what I was thinking as we dropped into free fall through the sky with nothing to hold on to. They said in the training before we went up - which was more about how we could in no way sue them for what we were about to do- that we wouldn't necessarily have the full sensation of falling because there was no orientation point to feel it, but they lied, it definitely felt like we were falling, are you kidding me?! When we landed on the ground I instinctually turned around and gave my tether guy a big hug. I loved that guy and I still do.

The reason I share this with you on Easter morning is because I think it's a good image for what happened at the resurrection; not for Jesus cause I have no idea what that must have been like though the promise is that we will know one day, but for the disciples. They went from the heaviest load of grief and sorrow at

the brutal execution and death of their friend who they had abandoned to his fate, to suddenly experiencing him alive again. I mean it was Jesus but not exactly him, back from the dead, alive but on a whole different order of aliveness and my best guess is that it was something of a freefall experience for them, freefalling from everything they had anchored their lives upon previously, which in no small part was an orientation that life ended in death. I think that orients us more than we know and yet here was a dead man speaking with them, an executed man with all the evidence of the execution on his body... but somehow alive.

Talk about freefalling with nothing to hold on to.

The women who went to the tomb that early morning and found it empty ran back to tell the 11 disciples that he wasn't there. The men, the scriptures say, "considered it an idle tale and did not believe them." As Rev. Judy suggested this morning at the sunrise service – bog surprise there! But Peter slipped out and ran to the tomb, so he must have given them some credit, and sure enough he looked in and saw it too – the emptiness, the tomb with no dead body, nothing there to hold except the linen clothes that had wrapped Jesus' body. Disoriented to say the least, Peter returned and marveled not at what he had seen but what he had NOT seen, namely his dead friend, until eventually Jesus appeared to all of them. But even then and in other Gospel accounts of the resurrection, when he appears he will not allow himself to be held on to. Mary Magdalene in John's account grabs him in joy and Jesus tells her not to hold on to him for he had not yet ascended to God. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus talk to someone they don't know is Jesus until he breaks bread with them then it dawns on them who this is and just as quickly he's gone again, the disciples left with nothing but bread to hold on to.

This is important in the Easter story, this emptiness. Almost as important as the *PRESENCE* of the resurrected Christ in these accounts is his absence and of anything really to hold on to. Easter is about a tomb that is empty, a corpse that is absent, an end of the story that is actually a beginning with nothing further written, empty pages awaiting the pen. And we could do worse to walk away from the Easter celebration wondering what here can we hold on to.

The distinctly Jewish revelation was that God is not one of the gods but the singular creating and sustaining mystery of existence itself, not a thing among many things but the source of all things, so as the theologian James Alison says “God is more like NO thing than God is like some thing”. You and I and everything we experience with our 5 senses is something and one of the dynamics of something is that it is not another thing and to be a thing necessarily displaces other things. But this is exactly what the Divine, what God does not do. God is not one of the gods among many or a bigger thing overarching all other things. God does not displace anything else that is, in order to be. I Am Who Am, is God’s answer when Moses asks God’s name. Moses wants a name for God as something to hold on to and he gets “I Am Who Am”. It’s natural for us humans to want a hand hold, a fixed point to orient ourselves but God’s very nature is point-less... more like no thing than something to hold onto, the originator, prime mover of existence rather than existence itself.

So it would only make sense that if Jesus Christ was in fact God incarnate whether he became that at the resurrection or had been that all along (which has been debated over the millennia) that in the great disclosure of the resurrection, there would be a certain inability to grasp him and hold on to him. And with our opposable thumbs we humans really really like to grab onto things and really

don't like to let go. Our grabbiness one could argue lies at the heart of our fallen and sinful nature.... Grabbing where we shouldn't be grabbing, grabbing for what is not ours, for a sense of identity, for to fill up the emptiness inside and this grabbiness sets us in rivalry with so much around us. We are marked or marred by rivalry with "the other" whoever or whatever that other is and this is true on the micro and macro levels of our existence.

On the world stage we see it screaming out in horrible situations like Russia's war against Ukraine; on the global level it's how we've tended to interact with the earth, believing that we must grab, displace, and devour the earth to get what we want and need, thus creating ecological disaster. On the national stage it plays out in competition over resources and the invisible hand of the market blessing some at the expense of others. On the local community stage it plays out on the Winchester residents Facebook page with at times vitriol and distrust, and on the interior stage it's rampant in our own egos not being at peace with ourselves unless we can see our own value over and against others... and those just a few examples of how our human lives are defined over and against others, in rivalry and with the need to displace the other in order to place or justify ourselves. That seems to be too often what we believe we need to hold on to.

Last week I preached about Jesus' trial and that moment when the crowd is asked by Pilate whether he should release Jesus Barabbas or Jesus known as the Christ and the crowd chants "release Jesus Barabbas and crucify Jesus the Christ!" And I mentioned that it was not a choice between evil Barabbas and innocent Jesus so much as a choice between revolution by violence or revolution by love, revolution through the violent displacement of the other to establish the self or revolution through conversion of heart where no one is displaced. We tend to

believe in the scarcity of this world which makes us grab hold and not let go, we believe that someone must lose in order for us to win and “it’s not going to be me...” and that’s what Jesus steps in to sacrifice himself for - to gum up the works of just that kind of justification and placement of ourselves.

It's one of the great disclosures of Easter – that at the heart of the world, at the heart of existence, there is enough and a hospitable and benevolent Heart. And to fall into that heart takes just that, a letting go and a free-falling from everything we tend to hold desperately on to. That’s the old form of existing and being but Jesus arose into a new form, existing no longer in that old form and one of the evidences of this is that he returns to life in such a way as not to be in rivalry with anyone else, refusing to displace anyone else, even his executioners. It’s stunning.

Jesus the risen Christ is evanescent in his eternal-ness or God-hood, such that we cannot hold onto him, of course we can’t, cause he is of God now. It is not an unfortunate side-effect of resurrection that he’s invisible and cannot be clung to. It might seem unfortunate for us who like to use our 5 senses to understand things, unfortunate in that it leaves a ton of questions and the door wide open to not believing it at all, but his not-being-there-like-things-are-there, his resurrection absence and his leaving of things empty and the wide open unwritten story ahead, leaves us with nothing to hold on to except to fall through to the Kingdom of God among us, which is about living as much as possible without being in rivalry and displacement of the other, whoever that other may be.

The Apostle Paul in Colossians refers to Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” and better than any actual human image we might draw up for Jesus, the invisible image of the outpouring of love is what we are given to behold.

But it’s hardly graspable. It’s really hard to hold on to and honestly we haven’t done it very well, speaking for the church. From the beginning we’ve put a death-grip on Jesus and said “he’s ours, not yours, he’s ours!” We’ve built our images of Jesus and our institutions to Jesus and we’ve gotten into devastating rivalries with others over Jesus and who we believe him to be – irony of ironies – we have used Jesus to displace others – we’re right, you’re wrong, we’re going to heaven you’re going to hell, blah, blah, blah.

Because we are determined to have something of this old life to hold on to when Jesus resurrected and inviting us into NEW life intentionally left us nothing to hold on to, he left us to freefall... He tried and tries to tether us to himself for that freefall, not leaving us alone but tethered to him in the state of having-nothing-to-hold-on-to so that we would know him intimately and with him not need to displace and be in rivalry with others and fall in love with him when we realize that God’s love is true and eternal and that, hey, we aren’t going to die.

We aren’t going to die if we love our enemies. We aren’t going to die if we forgive those who have hurt us instead of paying them back. We aren’t going to die if we don’t succeed. We aren’t going to die if we don’t win or even play the game. We aren’t going to die in the end of this life. We aren’t going to die so do not fear, do not grasp, hold on lightly, let yourself fall. There is a ground at the heart of existence and it’s a Heart, a ground of welcome and benevolence. It’s inviting and hospitable and makes enough room for everyone and everything.

I have to say, once Tracy and I both landed safely on the ground and untethered ourselves from our guides and I told my guide that I loved him, we walked out of there on cloud 9. We spent the rest of the day in this adrenaline joy, sat by a local lake as the afternoon waned toward evening and stared up into the sky just quiet together and really grateful for our lives on solid ground. And I think in those moments that we can let go into Easter and the practice of resurrection, when we can chose nonrivalry, nonviolence, forgiveness, when we do chose to not displace the other though we could, when we can let go, I think it is right there where heaven is and where joy is to be had, the joy of eternity, the joy of resurrection, the joy of love.

May you have a taste of that this Easter in the name of the resurrected Christ, who gives us nothing but his love to hold on to.