***Something To Hold On To*** *a**sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno, Mar. 31, 2024, Easter based on John 20:1-18*

“Life changes fast.” That’s something Joan Didion wrote in a memoir about her husband’s sudden death at the dinner table on December 30, 2003. “Life changes in an instant.” she says, “You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.”

That’s from her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. Joan said she remembered as many of the details as she could of what happened to her the year following her husband John’s death. How it unfolded; who was involved. Again and again her thoughts returned to the table that December night.

Somewhere in the middle of a sentence about the lasting effects of World War I, or was it a question about single malt whiskey, her beloved husband of almost 40 years, raised his left hand and slumped in his chair.

By the time they arrived at New York Hospital, only six blocks away, he was gone.

Sometimes it comes like that. Or sometimes it comes after a long illness and you’ve had time to prepare and adjust somewhat. You think you are going to be ready, and you’re trying, honestly, and then it comes and you find you aren’t prepared at all.

Death is a sneak thief. It picks the locks and comes down the hall while we are asleep and silently takes grandma. The container ship out of Baltimore, bound for Shri Lanka, has a power failure and hits a bridge; a tornado powers toward a subdivision instead of a desert canyon.

A sudden heart attack comes along when least expected, at the dinner table, while you’re talking about the troubles in Iraq and it’s possible connection to a war fought 100 years before.

“In the midst of life we are in death,” the minister says at the graveside, but none of us really wants to believe that. We are always surprised by death’s coming, no matter how expected; we never get used to it.

Edna St. Vincent Millay put it this way in her poem, *Dirge Without Music*

*I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground…*

*The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love,—  
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled  
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.   
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.*

You know, when death comes for our loved ones, we all try to hold on for dear life ... to memories, to sanity, to hope, to every blessed memory -- even the hard ones.

You try to hold on so that you can make it through the loss. You sift through the clothes and remember that this is the dress she wore the night of her seventieth birthday party. Or you look at the unused concert tickets and think of what you might have been doing, had there not been that unwelcomed turn of events.

I keep my dad’s Pendleton shirt next to mine because it still has a few of his hairs sprinkled on it and every time I look at it I think maybe he’ll be home soon and put it on.

We hang on to whatever we can hang on to, because no matter when or how it comes, death leaves us empty-handed.

Nobody knew this any better than Mary Magdalene that early Sunday morning when she set out for the tomb. In John’s version of the story, unlike the other gospels, she is carrying no spices or oils for anointing the body.

No, Mary’s addled mind is preoccupied by one thing only: her loss. She is there in the garden as the dawn breaks and none of the other women are with her. She is totally alone.

It is still dark when she arrives, which is both a description of the hour before the dawn comes, and also a description of Mary’s heart.

Suddenly, the darkness of the morning is broken by the unexpected sight of the tomb gaping. The stone’s been rolled away.

She doesn’t even bother to look inside. Mary turns and runs to fetch Peter and John and bring them back to help her; it’s just one jolt too many for her.

When they arrive with her at the tomb they see what she had seen from afar -- the grave clothes folded tenderly and laid to one side.

The gospel writer says, “The men returned home” which is somewhat anticlimactic – but it is, in fact, the natural reaction of men, isn’t it?

They are still fixated on wondering if the authorities will be coming next for them. They process it as best they can, and then decide to go home and forget it for now. This is, of course, how we men deal -- by, you know, *not* dealing.

But Mary, Mary is a woman. She can’t do that. She can’t consider what it means for herself until she has decided what it means for Jesus. She still feels a part of him.

Men, it is said, are like boxes, entirely self-contained. Women – women are more like wires – connecting all over hell.

So, anyway, Mary lingers in the garden weeping, unable to do anything else.

In the midst of her tears, two angels appear to her and ask why she is crying. Mary answers that Jesus’ body has been stolen and she doesn’t know where they have laid him.

It’s precisely at that point that he whose presence she longs to recover, appears and stands beside her. Jesus asks her why she is weeping, and she, thinking he is a gardener, says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will reclaim his body.”

A gardener? Really? That sounds nutty. In fact, it trips some people up, but this kind of thing happens all the time.

You know, it was thought to be an urban legend but it appears to be true that Charlie Chaplain once came in fourth in a Charlie Chaplin look-alike contest in San Francisco. He happened to be in town when one was happening and he entered it on a lark. Funny, eh?

I take this part of the Easter story as just another example of how none of us really knows another human the way we **think** we know them.

Yep, and we get reminders of this all the time.

I know the story of a couple that had been married over forty years who had their eyes opened about this very thing. Here’s how it happened. They decided one night to forgo their habit of watching *Netflix* to play games together instead. The wife, Violet, suggested *Scrabble.* Well, she beat the pants off her husband, Vern, with words like *hybrid* and *zygote*. "Zygote?" he said. What's a zygote? He'd never heard her use the word in conversation before.

Then they played *Gin Rummy* and Vern beat Violet just as badly. He was satisfied with a draw and ready to turn in for the night when she insisted on a tie-breaker.

She suggested they play *Twenty Questions*.

"How does that go?" he asked, "I've forgotten." She gave him the idea:

Somebody picks a person, place or thing and the other person gets twenty questions to guess it. Vern said, okay, but he wanted to pick the first word.

So he took a pencil and he wrote down, "Fish-lips."

He thought to himself, “She'll never get this in a million years."

So Violet said, "Is it something you can eat?"

Vern paused a long time, "Yeah." he said.

Then Violet said, “Is it something *we* eat?"

"No," he said.

"Is it fish-lips?" she said.

Vern was stunned. He stared at her. "You looked!" he shouted.

"No I didn't," she said.

"You had to have looked,” he said.

"Nope,” she said. “Just came to me; just popped into my head."

Vern looked at her, looked in her eyes -- right into the eyes of this woman that he called his wife; a woman he had lived with for 40 years and had the trouble of raising three children with *and he could not tell if she was fibbing or telling him the truth. (Garrison Keillor, Prairie Home Companion episode)*

Mary thought Jesus was the gardener, to which Jesus calls her by her name, “Mary;” and she, recognizing him, calls out to him, “Rabbouni,” which means “Teacher.”

Now at that moment Mary must have been reaching out to him – a most natural thing for a woman to do. And he says, “Do not hold me!” Which is an odd thing for him to say.

I mean, they should have embraced. They might easily have thrown themselves into each other’s arms and held on for dear life.

The Rev. Jon Walton says, “They might have at least ‘passed the peace.’” But “no,” as Mary reached out to grab-a-hold of him, Jesus said, “Do not hold onto me.”

You see, for John the gospel writer, the unexpected news of Easter is that there’s nothing, really, to hold onto. Which may be part of why it is so hard for some people to get a grip on Easter.

I mean, there’s no body, no corpse, nothing to touch.

In fact, Easter is defined as much by what is **not** there as by what is –

which is why you can’t prove it, though some preachers think that is precisely their task when Easter rolls around.

Presbyterian churchman, Eugene Peterson, remembers the preacher in his childhood church on Easter morning launching into a sermon on “the thirteen incontrovertible proofs that Jesus rose from the dead.“

“Proofs with which we could wrestle to the ground our unbelieving friends.”

Mostly Peterson remembers that it took the preacher an excruciating hour and a half to go through them all, “by which time nobody much cared anymore.”

So, yes, it would be nice if, when it comes to the resurrection, there was something with handles you could hold onto.

The whole idea of relics in the medieval world was just such a practice of trying to hold onto something dead which you might call unquestionably holy.

It had its heyday in the fifth through the sixteenth centuries. In the French Cathedral Church of Amiens, for example, they have preserved the skull of John the Baptist. It’s got a dent in it.

If you visit the church today the guides have several gruesome stories ready to tell you to account for this, stories that appeal mostly to seventh graders, truth be told.

The church of San Croce in Rome possesses what they will tell you is the finger of *Doubting Thomas*, the one he supposedly used to touch the body of the risen Jesus, though if you read the gospel closely, John doesn’t say that Thomas actually touched Jesus at all --- only that he was invited to touch him.

And we all know about the Shroud of Turin, which was pretty much discredited, until a new study of certain fibers in it determined that it was older than first believed; maybe going back to the year 300, but still probably not old enough to be from the time of Jesus.

Nevertheless, looking at it, it can fill you with wonder.

The Christian church has gone to extremes to hold onto these relics. Why? Because, like Mary, we don’t *let go* easily. Nor should we, if I can be honest about it. It wouldn’t be natural. It wouldn’t be human.

In my third year of being a minister, a wonderful 19-year-old young man in my congregation died suddenly. His name was Rusty. Rusty was on his way in his first car to pick up his first girlfriend after school.

He was blind-sided by a poorly trained officer on his way traveling much too fast to a false alarm on NE Killingsworth.

I met Rusty’s mother at home and then the next morning at the mortuary.

She said, “Can I see him?” The man at the mortuary said, “I wouldn’t advise it.” So she didn’t. We had a memorial service for him, and then a burial.

A year later she and I were visiting and she told me something. She said,

“I made a mistake. I’m sorry I didn’t at least ask to hold his hand and tell him I loved him; tell him goodbye, in person.”

She wasn’t dramatic. She was just a very thoughtful mother, and she felt she had missed out on doing something very basic when it came to her first-born. To just hold his hand.

Poor Mary understandably wanted contact with Jesus’ body. Then, once she sees him, understandably, she wants him back just the way he was before, which is probably why she called him “Rabbouni,” teacher, the familiar name by which she knew him.

Mary wanted Jesus back in a familiar role; back working miracles and drawing crowds on hillsides, multiplying loaves and fishes, restoring the legs of the lame, the eyes of the blind; calling forth, as he did, a little girl from the dead with the words. “Talitha cum,” “Little girl, I say to you, arise.” He was something!

The hard lesson, for those who grieve, is that we cannot go back and have the ones we love the way they were.

We cannot hold onto them in the way that we most long to. Not if we are to go on living into a healthy future.

Besides, those things we hold most tightly to, we often squeeze the life out of, don’t we?

That’s merely a fact of life and most of us learn it somewhere along the way.

“Do not hold onto me,” Jesus says. Why? Because he’s **not** on his way back to the past, he’s on his way to God, and he’s intent on taking the whole world with him.

What Easter reminds us of, is that in God, the past is folded into the future, and all that has been is prelude to all that will be, so that in the end, nothing will be lost. Nothing

I love how Thomas Merton has said it: “The joy and consolation of our life is realizing that what we have, cannot be lost because it is God’s.”

“The only thing we cannot do is hold on to him. He has asked us please ***not*** to do that, because he knows that, all in all, we would rather keep him with us where we are, than let him take us where he is going.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

Better we should let **him** hold on to **us**. Better we should let him take us into the white-hot presence of God, who is not behind us but ahead of us, every step of the way.

The Good news, this resurrection morning, is simply that we have not seen the last of him, nor the last of those we love, nor of a new world that is coming into being a --- world of God’s making where there is neither sorrowing, nor sighing anymore, and where every tear will be wiped away.

Here is a truth that is better than we expected, and more than we yet understand, the affirmation on which all our hopes are founded -- that nothing—nothing in death or life — nothing in all creation— will separate us from the love of God in Christ.

That’s my resurrection picture this year: all the people I love, including Rusty and my dad safe and secure, forever, in the huge wonderful love of God.

So breathe easily, live deeply, love passionately, hold to your dear ones, but not so tight you squeeze the life out of them.

Give your life away. Christ is risen . . .

Amen.

*I owe a debt to the Rev. Jon Walton for his Easter Sermon, “Nothing To Hold On To,” which was the inspiration for this sermon, giving me a starting place and scaffolding to use in constructing it.*

*“I was always holding onto people, and they were always leaving.”  
―****Lili St. Crow,***[***Jealousy***](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/6794661)