

"TOUCH ME NOT"

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

"Touch Me not, for I am not yet ascended to My Father"

John 20:17

Mary Magdalene had more reason than almost anyone else to mourn the death of the Lord. He had cast seven devils out of her. She owed her sanity, her humanity to Him. But she had watched Him die on the cross. He was gone, and His healing power would be known no more. All that was left for her was to mourn His past greatness. Her unspeakable joy when she became the first person in all the world to know the great message of Christianity has resonated through the ages. What must she have felt that first Easter morning when He spoke her name!

Yet into this moment the Lord injected a strange note. In her joy she must have embraced Him, for He cautioned her, saying, "Do not touch Me (cling to Me) for I am not yet ascended to My Father." It seems a strange thing to say to one whose joy was so full; yet the Lord, who is infinitely kind, spoke what was needed. She still did not know Him. She had thought He was someone who could die, but He did not know death. She had thought evil people could hurt Him, but He had transcended all evil. She had thought of Him as her Master, a great teacher and leader, but He was Her God.

"I am not yet ascended to My Father." But He was! He had glorified His Human on Good Friday, and now He was one with the Father. So why did He say that? The point is that in her mind He was not yet ascended to the Father. She thought of Him as less than God. If she was to be conjoined to Him, she had to lift up her thought about Him.

This same idea is contained in other words of the Lord, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32). We have to elevate Him in our minds above an earthly idea: we must acknowledge Him as God if we are to let Him draw us up to Himself.

What was true of Mary was true also of the Christian church. It always had trouble seeing that the Lord Jesus Christ is the one God of heaven and earth. Many good Christians have worshiped Him in their hearts, and learned that great truth in the world to come. But the church itself taught a divided trinity.

And now, today, the Lord has revealed in the Writings for the New Church that He is indeed God. He has ascended to the Father, even as He promised, and we can worship Him, and touch Him. For He came down to earth so that we could touch Him - that is, be conjoined with Him and feel His healing power. We might say, therefore, that today this promise has been fulfilled. "I ascend to My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God." We believe that the Writings for the New Church were given so that people may see that the Lord is the one God.

But that is only part of the truth. The story of Easter is not only a record of past events. It tells of the future for all people. In the spiritual sense of the Word, each of us goes through the spiritual journey of these stories, and Mary's experience is ours as well.

Mary was a good woman. Seven devils had been cast out of her, representing the Lord's power over evil in us. She was, however, deeply despairing because of the Lord's crucifixion. It seemed that her religion was dead, because its inspired leader was dead.

Each of us will face great challenges to our faith at times. It may come in many forms, but it will seem to us that life with its problems is too much for us. And often it may seem that our particular hell is all powerful in us. It has destroyed our faith in the Lord. As on Good Friday, so long ago, the Lord Himself will seem to be gone from us.

And where is the Lord found today? Today He comes to us through the pages of His Word - through the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Writings. For it is there that we know who He is, what kind of a God He is.

In times of distress it feels that He is dead to us - crucified! His Word has proved powerless, the forces of evil have prevailed. As the passers by mocked Jesus on the cross, so it seems that harsh reality mocks our faith. Mary Magdalene was at Calvary. She saw Him die - or so she thought.

Early in the morning she came to the sepulcher. Easter morning represents a new state, in which the Lord is about to show Himself. But she did not find Him. Why not?

The spiritual reason is that often we see the Word wrongly. Mary expected to see Him lying dead - or sealed off by a great stone. We too, if we think in a limited way of the power of the Lord's Word, almost expect to see that its power is dead to us, because that is what we have experienced.

All of a sudden He was there! He stood, and asked her the same question the angels had asked, and added another: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" What beautiful questions, at the moment when her sorrow was about to end, her search to be over! The Lord calls to us in His Word when we are in despair, when things seem hard, when we can't seem to love beautiful ideals any longer. "Why do you weep?" "Whom do you seek?"

She thought He was the gardener. A garden signifies intelligence in the Word. Sometimes we think of the Writings as a gardener. They are wonderful books, which give us insights. As a gardener tends plants and trees, so the Writings help lovely ideals to grow and thrive in our minds. As the gardener weeds and protects the plants, so the Writings show us how to overcome evils so that we may follow our ideals.

But a gardener is a mortal human being! Mary was not seeing clearly! It was the Lord God of heaven and earth who stood before her. So she asked Him for limited help. Please take me where He is so that I may grieve over Him.

If we think of the Writings as the works of a gardener, they cannot help us through the desperate moments of our lives. Their ideas are wonderful, but when our faith dies, the best they can do is help us to grieve. This is a very real temptation in all of us - even when we feel that we believe with all our hearts that the Writings for the New Church are the Lord's Word. Part of us still thinks of them as a set of lovely ideas, and fears that maybe they are too good to be true. Such a faith may be fine when things go well, but it is not equal to the trials of life.

Then came the miracle. Jesus spoke her name. "Mary!" What a change came about in the way she thought of Him, as she looked at Him anew, and found her faith, and her Lord, alive. Yet even then she did not see. She called Him Master, and embraced Him, and He gently cautioned her.

In the dawn of a new morning, when the dark night of our struggles are ending, we find that the Writings can answer the problems of life. They don't die. They have power over all evil. This dawning faith is the joy of which the Lord spoke when He said, "You now have sorrow; but I will see you again, and you will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you." (John 16:22)

How eagerly we embrace that newfound faith. How gratefully we accept that the Word can solve our problems.

Yet there is one more step that we must take. "Touch Me not," the Lord said to Mary. The word He used can be translated as "Do not cling to Me." It is the same word as was used when Jesus touched a leper and cleansed him. The woman who had an issue of blood touched (or clasped) the hem of His garment and was healed; and Jesus touched Jairus's daughter, and she rose from the dead. So also the Lord touched little children, representing His protection of interior states of innocence.

"Touch Me not." Here is the eternal reason why the Lord said these words. Mary, in her boundless joy, called Him "Rabboni." That means, "Teacher." It is not enough to see the Word as our teacher, just full of truths.

"I am not yet ascended to My Father," Jesus said. The Father means the Divine love. Mary was a good person, who had been through so many torments, and she loved the Lord. We may fight to obey Him, but He is more than our "Teacher." His Word is more than truth, it is goodness itself, that from which all love is created in us. "All things were made by the Word and without it was not anything made that was made." All things - all love.

"Touch Me not." At the moment of her wondrous joy comes a caution. Sometimes, when the hells in us are conquered, and we feel that the Lord is with us once again, alive, with all His

power, we will be ready for one more step.

"But go to My brethren and say to them, I ascend to My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God." He actually promises us that if we are following Him, we will take that step. We will see the infinite love within His truths. Then, just as Mary never again doubted, our faith will be certain. And His love will come to us. "I ascend to My Father, and your Father."

Are the Writings the work of the Divine Gardener? Do they have lovely ideas, do they weed out our faults and allow our loves to grow and flourish? Yes, surely they do. Are they our Teacher, able to break through our unhappy states and give us joy, even as Mary felt such great joy on Easter morning? Surely they are. But we are invited to see them as so much more: as the manifestation of our everlasting Father, as the source of all love in our lives, as the way to heaven.

And here is the lovely promise of Easter morning. It was the Lord Himself who led Mary through those three steps. He stood before her, allowing her to think Him the gardener, even as He allows us to see the Writings as the source of beautiful ideals, and little more. He then spoke and let her know who He was. So too He shows us the power of His Word, and through it shows us His presence. Then He leads us ever upward when He calls us to see Him as God. "I do ascend to My Father, and your Father, and to My God and your God."

It will happen, if we wish Him to touch us with His healing hands. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." Amen.

Lessons: John 20:1-19; TCR 108/9; AC 10023

John 20:1-4, 12-19: Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together. But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her.

TCR 109: All the churches that existed before the Lord's coming were representative churches; and only in shadow could Divine truths be seen by them. But after the Lord's coming into the world a church was established by Him which saw, or rather was able to see, Divine truths in light. The difference is like that between evening and morning; likewise in the Word the state of the church before the Lord's coming is called evening, and the state after His coming is called morning. Before the Lord came into the world He was present with people of the church, but only mediately, through angels who represented Him; but since His coming He is present with people of the church immediately; and this for the reason that in the world He put on also a Divine Natural in which He is present with men. The glorification of the Lord is the glorification of His Human, which He assumed in the world.... The truth of this is evident from the fact that the Lord rose from the tomb with the whole of the body that He had in the world, leaving nothing in the tomb, and therefore took with Him from the tomb the Natural Human itself from the firsts to the lasts of it. So after the resurrection when His disciples thought that what they saw was a ghost, He said to them:

See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; handle Me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have (Luke 24:37, 39).

This makes it clear that by means of His glorification His natural body was made Divine.

AC 10023: 6-8: Since the laying-on of hands was a sign of transmission, transference, and reception, one may recognize what the laying-on of hands means in Matthew, "A ruler came to Jesus and said, My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live. Jesus went in, took her hand, and the girl arose." Matt. 9:18,19,25.

In Mark, "Jesus laid hands on the blind man's eyes, and he was restored." Mark 8:25.

In these places it is evident that when the Lord laid His hand on people, and also when He touched them, the meaning was the transmission and reception of Divine power. The fact that these things are meant is perfectly clear in Mark,

"A certain woman came behind and touched Jesus' garment, saying, If I touch merely His garment I shall be healed. And immediately she was healed of the affliction. And Jesus perceived within Himself that power had gone out of Him." Mark 5:27-30.

And in Luke, "The entire crowd sought to touch Jesus, because power went out from Him and healed them all." Luke 6:19.

It is also evident what laying His hands on children and young children means. Laying them on children is described in Matthew, "Children were brought to Jesus that He might lay His hands on them. Jesus said, Let the children be and do not forbid them to come to Me; of such is the kingdom of heaven. And He laid His hands on them." Matt. 19:13-15.

And laying His hands on young children is spoken of in Mark, "Jesus took the young children up in His arms, and put His hands on them, and blessed them." Mark 10:16.

This laying of His hand on children and on young children likewise means the transmission and reception of Divine power, enabling a person's interiors to be healed, which is salvation.