

**Sermon Preached by the Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector  
at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on Easter Sunday, Year B  
March 31, 2024**

John 20:1-18

*Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my disciples and say, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*

Caroline looks like an angel... not the scary, biblical ones who say “Do not be afraid.” She is one of the adorable angels with innocent eyes and infectious giggles, not yet scarred by the world. Being five years old, she often *acts* like an adorable angel. Skipping down the aisle of church, all sweetness and light, with a beaming smile. But, because she is five, *sometimes* when she is tired or hungry or doesn’t want to be there... she can suddenly act *not so angelic*.

You may have noticed the children following a cross in procession, down the aisle, soon after the 11:00 a.m. worship starts. They go to an age-appropriate service with readings and sermon by one of the clergy. Several of our musicians join to lead us in song. It is all coordinated by our wonderful Vicki Rispoli and team to create a nurturing environment to encounter Jesus in a way they can understand and relate.

A few weeks ago, I led the children’s liturgy that I absolutely love doing. There is a photo of that in the back of the bulletin. We had candle lighting, a reading and prayers, and then a sermon with loads of questions... some even vaguely related to what we discussed. The best part was the hymn after the sermon. It sounded like a march. So all twelve children and adults jumped up and processed around in a circle as we sang.

All but *one* child. Not five minutes before she was angelic, laughing. Then, suddenly, she scooted back against the chair with her feet dangling over the end, a scowl on her face and arms crossed in defiance. The body language was unmistakable. *I am not* going to do *that*. While the rest of us marched around singing, she sat unmoved averting her eyes as we passed. Brilliant.

Jesus beckons and invites... never compels or coerces... so that was my strategy to welcome the little angel to participate.

The first time in front of her, I stretched out my hand and sang, “Oh, Caroline, why are you sad, won’t you join us?” to the tune of the song. Her face softened and eyes focused. She leaned forward, reached out a trembling hand, hesitated, and then snapped back into place obviously mad with herself for even considering the invitation. Trying to emulate our Lord, I am perpetually persistent which is a polite way to say stubborn.

On the second pass, I reached out my hand closer and called her by name. “Caroline, come on.” She scooted forward and touched the tip of my hand as we passed, a look of uncertainty on her face, but still sat there as her hand dropped to her lap. Her resolve was impressive.

The third pass was the last chance because it was also the last verse of the song. I reached out my hand, but not as close this time... she had to *want* to join us..., and called her by name, “Caroline.” She scooted out of the chair, as only a child can, and clenched my hand. With pursed lips and squinted eyes she looked up at me and said with determination, “I’ll do it...but I won’t like it!” And then we walked hand in hand to the song.

*Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my disciples and say, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*

On the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene was the first one to visit the tomb. Why? We are not told explicitly but can make an educated guess from human nature and the rest of the story. Her hometown of Magdala was known as the "castle of fish" and was likely a fish processing center. It was near where Jesus carried out most of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee. Jesus likely taught in the synagogue in her village. Mary Magdalene was a follower, a disciple of Jesus, from the beginning and may have been the very first one. She was *not* a reformed prostitute and not his wife. To claim either robs her of the authority she obviously carried.

Mary is mentioned in the Gospels twelve times which is more than most of the other disciples. One story (Luke 8:1-2) reports that Jesus healed her of seven demons. People then thought demons were the cause of most diseases rather than germs or heredity or bad habits or bad luck.

It could have been a physical or emotional ailment that Jesus healed. Whatever it was, seven suggests a completeness. She was completely broken and made whole again by Jesus. It is very often the person who has been wrecked by life knows what real healing and resurrection are.

The demons she had may well be like those that haunt us. It is always helpful to name your demons whatever their origin. Hers or ours might be called despair, betrayal, injustice, heartbreak, fear, sickness, or alienation. What demons are running amok in your life right now? Imagine if Jesus freed you from all of them. That's who Mary was and what she experienced.

We also know two other vital facts about Mary Magdalene. She was present at the crucifixion of Jesus when all the male disciples ran away. Maybe she was braver or less likely to be arrested or both. Secondly, she was the first to visit the tomb. She may have been devastated and heartbroken but she was faithful above all else, she kept trying even when she didn't want to.

And there we find her on the first Easter morning. She was shocked the stone covering the tomb was removed. She ran and told two of the other disciples. They went into the tomb, looked around, and went back home. Mary kept looking for Jesus.

Alone, crying her eyes out... she bent down to look in the tomb, as we might, to check one last time something we already know to be true. She encountered two angels sitting there. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" What a stupid question! She might have responded, That is what you do when someone you love is dead. Instead, she pointed out the obvious that someone had removed the body. How could she pay respects to her friend with the body gone?

She immediately turned around, looked outside the tomb... away from death, and saw Jesus but did not recognize him. Why not? It may be grief clouded her vision. It may be that she could not imagine a dead person resurrected... no one believed that could happen then or now. Or maybe Jesus simply looked different, transformed. A five-year old version of yourself and a fifty-year old version of yourself bear similarities but are hardly recognizable as the same person. One can imagine a similar phenomenon from one life to the next. In the resurrection, there is continuity with the old but one has become a new creation.

In any case, Jesus asked the same question as the angels. "Woman, why are you weeping?" Note the distance created by calling her "woman" instead of by name. She had to figure out who he was for herself. Only when Jesus called her by name did she recognize him, Mary!

With disbelief she called out, “Rabbi,” which is what she called him since they met. It was a term of respect, familiarity and relationship. What did she do next? What would you do if you encountered a loved one you thought was dead? She rushed to embrace him, to hold him close and never let him go. The embrace was a physical embodiment of disbelief turned to hope.

Jesus’s response seems bizarre at first. Someone suggested that Jesus was not a hugger. I doubt that and think the embrace probably lasted quite a while. But they could not stay in that moment forever. Jesus and Mary each had a vital job. She was to become the first apostle. The word “apostle” means one who is sent with a message. An ambassador. That is, she was the first one sent to share the good news that Jesus was alive and all that meant for her and for the world.

*Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my disciples and say, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*

Mary was sent to live in the new, resurrected life rather than hold on to or be stuck in the past. All the demons she had were to be left behind. We know, from experience, that there are always scars from the figurative demons in our lives. Jesus, himself, still bore scars from the nails in his hands and feet and side. But he was not stuck there. Not even death could hold him.

More than that, Jesus was not on his way back to the disciples. He was carrying out his vital part of God’s mission. Jesus was on the way to God to take the whole world with him. (Idea from Barbara Brown Taylor). To storm the gates of hell and release all the captives. To bring healing and new life to those who embrace it. To transform disbelief and despair into hope.

On this Easter morning, I find myself a mix of both the little angel and Mary Magdalene. Maybe we all are. We can refuse to participate or only on our terms. We can be stuck in the past preferring the company of the old demons. The scars from them should be sufficient. We can keep looking in empty tombs expecting a different answer than last time. We can be mad at God or organized religion for what they have done or not done for or to us. Despite it all, God is still there reaching out to you, calling you by name, as long as it takes. If you need help in the journey, Calvary is a community to support you through it. We all need that.

Mary and the little angel, all of us, have to reach out our hands and take the first step. That’s faith. You don’t even have to like it. Jesus always goes ahead of us, calling us by name, beckoning, inviting us to leave the tomb behind and embrace new life.

