

“Stop the Clock”

“Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.’”

A regulation football game officially goes for 60 minutes, but in real time it usually takes at least three hours to play a game. There are many reasons for this: halftime, transition times between quarters, teams transitioning after touchdowns and field goals. But the main reason why football games take so long are time outs, the ability of each team to stop the clock. Both teams get three time outs per half to stop the clock during strategic moments in the game, usually toward the end of their half. A team can also stop the clock by running the ball out of bounds or by intentionally grounding the ball. Coaches are often judged by their time management abilities, the skill they have in stopping the clock at the right moment in order to lead their team to victory.

While such opportunities are usually not afforded to us, there are moments when we would like to “stop the clock.” It may be a hectic day in which we don’t seem to have enough hours to accomplish all of our tasks, or a deadline that is rapidly approaching, or a difficult decision that we would rather not make. We may want to “stop the clock” to freeze a precious moment in our lives: a family reunion, or a vacation, or a wonderful day spent with close friends. But sadly, *“time [is] like an ever-rolling stream that soon bears us all away.”* We cannot stop the clock, or hold onto a precious moment, or prevent the inevitable movement of time. There are no “time outs” in real life.

Mary Magdalene certainly wanted to “stop the clock” on that first Easter morning, especially after all she had endured in the past few days. Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus’ closest followers, one who was present during much of his ministry, and one of the women who was there on Good Friday when Jesus *“bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”* (John 19:30). She comes to his tomb early on Sunday morning, the first opportunity she would have had to visit the place where Jesus’ body had been laid. John does not tell us why Mary visited Jesus’ grave that morning; perhaps it was to complete the burial rituals, or to pay her respects to her deceased friend, or to weep over the place where his remains had been entombed. Whatever her reason, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb believing that all was finished, that all was lost, that her hopes and dreams had also died when Jesus died at Golgotha.

But when Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb, she sees *“that the stone had been removed from the tomb.”* (20:1). Believing that someone has stolen Jesus’ body, *“she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’”* (20:2). Peter has functioned as a representative of all of Jesus’ disciples throughout the Fourth Gospel, one who embodies the full range of discipleship: confession of faith, misunderstanding, and denial. The disciple “whom Jesus loved” (identified elsewhere as John) is always identified in this Gospel by his relationship with Jesus and never by his name.

- “Peter has many roles in the Fourth Gospel, but the beloved disciple has only one role: to embody the love and intimacy with Jesus that is the goal of discipleship in John.” – Gail O’Day.

The two disciples respond to Mary’s report by running to the grave; the Beloved Disciple outruns Peter, but chooses not to enter the tomb. When Peter goes into the tomb, *“he saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.”* (20:6-7). The evidence of the burial cloths suggests that the body was not stolen, since grave robbers would not have unwound the body from its wrappings. When Lazarus emerged from the tomb after Jesus

commanded him *"Lazarus, come out!"* (11:43), he was still wrapped in his grave clothes (*"his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth."* – 11:44), and he depended on Jesus' command to free him from his wrappings (*"Unbind him and let him go."*). Jesus' grave clothes, on the other hand, remain behind in the empty tomb. It is the fulfillment of Jesus' words that no one will take him away, that he alone will leave death behind:

- “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” – 10:17-18.

When the beloved disciple sees the empty tomb and the grave clothes lying where Jesus' body had been, *“he saw and believed”* (20:8); what he believes is the evidence of the empty tomb – not merely that the tomb is empty, but that its emptiness bears witness that Jesus has conquered death and judged the ruler of this world:

- “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” – 12:31.
- “I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.” – 14:30-31.
- “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” – 16:33.

Even though the Beloved Disciple believed when he saw the evidence at the empty tomb, he did not yet fully grasp the significance of what he was witnessing, *“for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”* (20:9). Such understanding would come after *“the disciples returned to their homes,”* where soon they would encounter the one who would give them such an understanding.

But Mary Magdalene stays behind. She is the only person at the empty tomb in all four Gospels, but only in John does Mary “weep” at the tomb. Mary weeps as we all weep when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, weeping for the one who is gone from her sight as well as for all of her future hopes and dreams that have died along with him. Through her tear-filled eyes, Mary looks into the tomb again; and this time *“she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet.”* (20:12). Unlike in Luke's Gospel, where *“the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground”* (Luke 24:5), in John Mary Magdalene isn't shocked or terrified at their presence; *“she treats them like orderlies stripping a hospital bed where you were looking for someone you loved.”* (Barbara Lundblad). The angels make no Easter announcement, but only draw attention to Mary's grief: *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* (20:13). Her response to the angels is a reiteration of the cause of her own grief: *“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”* Mary still believes that grave robbers have stolen Jesus' body, which has served to compound her inconsolable grief. But while they say nothing to comfort Mary, the angels' location, *“sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying,”* may echo Jesus' promise in 1:51: *“Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”* While these angels are not messengers, they serve as *“evidence of the inbreaking of the promised new age in Jesus' death and resurrection.”* (O'Day).

Only John locates the tomb in a garden, which is why Mary Magdalene assumes that the man who approaches her must be a gardener. We know what she does not: that the one standing before her is Jesus, who repeats to Mary the first words that he speaks in the Fourth Gospel: *“What are you looking for?”* (1:38). But Mary is unable to recognize Jesus, and instead pleads with the one she believes is a gardener that *“if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”* (20:15). Mary still believes that she is in the garden to make final arrangements, not for the beginning of what will soon become a new chapter in her life that announces a new beginning for all of God's people. Everything changes when the gardener utters her

name: "Mary!" It is the act of Jesus speaking Mary's name that enables her to recognize him. Jesus again reveals himself as the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep by name and they respond to his voice:

- "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me ... I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice ... My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." – 10:14, 16, 27.
- "But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." – Isaiah 43:1.

When she hears the unknown gardener call her name, it is as if scales have fallen from Mary's eyes; she recognizes that the man standing before her is Jesus and cries out "*Rabbouni*," an Aramaic word that is a personal address or form of endearment of the word "rabbi," teacher. In speaking her name, Jesus opens Mary's eyes to witness his resurrected body as he provides her with the promised transformation from weeping and pain to joy that has been accomplished through his word and presence.

- "Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but you pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." – 16:20-22.

It is at this moment that Mary Magdalene tries to "stop the clock," reaching out and holding tight to Jesus so that he is never lost again. She understandably wants to hold on to him and preserve this moment of reunion when the Risen Lord uttered her name and her sorrow was transformed into joy. She wanted to stop time so that what she had found might never be lost again, to make this a moment in time that would never be taken away from her again. But the first command of the Risen Lord to Mary is a warning for her not to stop the clock and preserve this moment in the garden: "*Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.*" (20:17).

- "It was a peculiar thing for him to say since there is no evidence she was holding on to him in any way. Unless it was what she called him – my Teacher – the old name she used to call him. Maybe he could hear it in her voice, how she wanted him back the way he was so they could go back to the way they were, back to the old life where everything was familiar and not frightening like it was now. 'Rabbouni!' she called him, but that was his Friday name, and here it was Sunday – an entirely new day in an entirely new life." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

As joyful as this moment of reunion is for Mary, stopping the clock at this time and place would prevent Jesus from fulfilling his mission for all people that will happen only when he has *ascended to the Father*, so that he might fulfill the promise he made to his disciples in his Farewell Discourse:

- "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also ... I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." – 14:2-3, 6.

Instead of stopping the clock, Mary is commanded by the Risen Jesus to go and proclaim the good news of his ascension: "*But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'*" Jesus' identity as the Son of Man will be confirmed by his ascension; for "*no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*" (3:13). Because Jesus has promised to "*prepare a place for you,*" his ascension is the ultimate fulfillment of his promises to those he loves.

As strong as the temptation was for her to “stop the clock,” Mary Magdalene is obedient to Jesus’ commands. She lets go of him, leaves the garden, and “*went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord; and she told them that he had said these things to her.’*” (20:18). Mary is the first witness to the resurrection, announcing both the fact of Jesus’ rising from the grave and the content of his message.

- “The love of God embodied in Jesus was not of temporary duration, lasting only as long as the incarnation. Rather, the truth of Jesus’ revelation of God receives its final seal in his return to God. Cross/resurrection/ascension is the decisive eschatological event for the Fourth Evangelist, because it forever changes the way God is known in the world and makes God’s new age a reality.” – O’Day.

Easter Sunday has always been my favorite day of the church year (I even prefer it over Christmas!). It is a day when we gather in a full sanctuary filled with flowers and signs of the new life of spring as we join our voices in singing that “Jesus Christ is risen today! Alleluia!” Men and women, parents and children gather in their Easter finery to rejoice in the central message of the Christian faith, that Christ the Lord is risen, he is risen indeed, alleluia! We gather on this day that makes all of our days possible, the day that is at the centre of our hope as children of God; for “*just as Christ has been raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too [will] walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:4-5). The joy I experience on Easter morning is so profound that I wish that I could “stop the clock” to preserve this time, this place, this joyful Eastertide for all times.

But Easter worship is not football; we cannot stop the clock. The time will come when this service will end, we will leave the building and go on to live our everyday lives with all of their challenges, their disappointments, and their losses. Some people with whom we share this Easter may not be with us next Easter; friends who are dear to us today may become estranged from us tomorrow; the gladness of this day might be replaced by the sadness of the next day. We cannot stop the clock and hold onto this Easter Day any more than Mary Magdalene was able to stop the clock and hold onto the Risen Lord who had appeared to her in the garden that first Easter morning. But our inability to stop the clock should not deter us from experiencing the true joy of this Easter; for when our Lord commands us not to hold on to this moment in time, he is at the same time pointing to a time and place that is even greater and more joyous than what we are experiencing on this day of Resurrection:

- “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. Better we should let him hold on to *us*, perhaps. 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.” – Taylor.

Even on this joyful Easter, now is not the time for us to “stop the clock.” Christ the Lord is risen, and he has gone ahead to prepare for us our eternal home, where “*God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*” (Revelation 21:3-4). Now is not the time for us to stop the clock, because the fullness of time has not yet been accomplished; and the best is yet to come! Amen.