

The Risen Savior's Heart-Work in Mary Magdalene-2 sermonaudio.com

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Dear congregation, in the closing prayer this morning we made reference to the fact that we would continue the same theme this afternoon, "The Risen Christ's Heart-Work in Mary Magdalene," and we wish to do that by looking at verses 17 and 18 of John 20. John 20:17-18,

17 Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. 18 Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

So our theme, then, this afternoon is again the risen Christ's heart-work in Mary Magdalene. We will see that in three thoughts. First, in his lesson for her heart, "Touch me not." Secondly, in his commission to her heart, "but go to my brethren." And third, in obedience from her heart, "Mary Magdalene came and told." The risen Christ's heart-work in Mary Magdalene in his lesson for her heart, his commission to her heart, and in obedience from her heart.

Well, we left Mary this morning and Jesus in a place that is almost too good to be true, two wonderful words of mutual sacred exchange and encounter, "Mary," and, "Rabboni," have bonded them together. The first word has taught us that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep, "Mary." The second teaches us that the sheep know the voice of their Shepherd, "Rabboni." And in that sacred sacred moment beyond all human vocabulary, these two have their bands broken. Jesus with his grave clothes left behind and Mary with her spices left behind, they may rejoice in each other. Christ is glad with Mary and Mary is glad with Christ. And it's Mary's natural response in this sacred moment to desire like in times of old to fall at the feet of Jesus. Her heart is filled like a bride. She can say, "I found him whom my soul loveth. I held him and would not let him go." All that she has lost is turned to sudden possession.

So as she's about to reach out and embrace Christ, as she's about to hold onto him and to prolong that sacred moment, suddenly surprisingly Rabboni stops her and he immediately begins to instruct her. "Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not," literally in the Greek, "cling to me not." But what a strange request. What a puzzling lesson. The encounter is so

sacred and so intimate and so precious and suddenly a wall is put up, a barrier in that barrier-free moment, "Touch me not." And the strangeness of this lesson is compounded by the fact that later on in this very chapter we read that Jesus said to Thomas, "Go ahead and stick your hand into my side. Touch me, Thomas." Now what is going on? Why the invitation to touch for one, and the command not to touch for the other?

Well, congregation, God knows how to lead each one of his children according to their particular need. Often when we're on baby visits in the hospital, I make some comment like this to the parents, I say, "I hope the Lord may give you wisdom to rear this child," because no two children can be raised exactly alike. Isn't that true? You try to be fair as a parent but each child has his or her own personality, his or her own peculiar need and we need wisdom for each particular child, and so it is in spiritual life. There were reasons why Jesus said to Thomas, "Reach hither your hand and put it into my side," and there are also reasons why Jesus said to Mary, "Touch me not." I'd like to give you three or four of those reasons briefly this afternoon.

The first is that Christ knows how prone Mary would be to never let him go. Mary must be weaned from his physical presence to end in higher spiritual communion alone. So Jesus is warning Mary in a loving way, in a firm way against any unholy familiarity, any unholy boldness that leans on his sensible physical presence. He wanted to teach Mary that his relationship with her now that he's resurrected from the dead is not precisely the same as it was before he died, that now she has to grow spiritually to be weaned away from that daily physical association that she had had with Jesus before. Not that the relationship would be more shallow now, just the opposite, the relationship would be more spiritual, it would be richer, for a new era had gone. It would be the communion of the ascended Lord in the Spirit with his church. You see, Mary was probably prone to think too much of Jesus' humanity and too little of his divinity and Jesus wants to wean her away from his literal flesh and help her to trust more in the spiritual dimension of the relationship in the work of his Spirit, showing her the things of Christ.

Paul put it this way later on in 2 Corinthians, he said, "We know no man after the flesh, yea though we have known Christ after the flesh yet now henceforth know we him no more." And Paul goes on to explain there that we only know him by the Spirit out of a living faith. But you say, "But what does that have to do with us today?" Well, often in the beginning of the way spiritually, God allows us, may I say it so, almost a kind of physical presence. There's a kind of nearness that is precious that seems to us at the time that Jesus is ready to answer every beck and call. He's always there. He's always answering one prayer after another and we go from strength to strength, from prayer answer to prayer answer. We live off of our feelings. We live off of our emotions. We live off of our experiences. But the time comes when Jesus says, "I want to wean you to live more by faith and less by sight." So the answers to prayer don't come as often and we have to rely more on a spiritual relationship, more on what the old divines called naked faith that sees no answer, that lives by hope unseen. And what a painful lesson this can be.

We're all prone to want to see, isn't that true? That's one of the appeals, I don't want to keep referring to this Mel Gibson film but that's one of the appeals of the show, that people see it. Last night I had a black pastor call me up from the South and he said, "My people are just so enthralled with this film." He said, "I feel like there's something wrong but I can't put my finger on it but can you help me?" One thing I said to him was it's making people dependent on the physical. They see the physical. They rely on the physical. They weep over the physical. But Jesus when he arose in those 40 days, one of his grand purposes was to remove the physical dimension. That's why the disciples couldn't go to him wherever he was in those 40 days, they didn't know where he was. They had to learn to begin to live by faith, "Touch me not, Mary. I want to teach you a deeper lesson, you must live by faith."

Secondly and closely related to this is, is that Christ would say to Mary that even though he is hers forever, there is still more he must yet do for her, still more that he must do for her. You see, that sacred moment, it was for Mary as if everything was done and she so rejoiced that she felt like, "Well, from here on in everything will be wonderful," but she didn't realize that Jesus had yet to ascend to his Father and her Father and to from heaven minister to her by his Spirit. God had majesty and grace as our Heidelberg Catechism puts it and, you see, Mary has to learn that yet. Horatius Bonar says of Mary and Thomas in this chapter, he said something quite profound, he said she believed too much, as it were, he too little. She was all faith, faith to hastening its conclusion. He was all unbelief, unbelief, refusing to believe even that this was his Master.

So Jesus handled each one wisely. He invited Thomas to touch him and confirm his faith, he stooped to Thomas' level to begin to lift him up, but Mary here was full of faith, she didn't need to touch him though she desired it. So Christ would remove the prop and he would teach her to realize that she had to live out of an ascended Jesus. That's why he says to her, "Touch me not for," this is the reason, "I am not yet ascended to my Father. There is a day coming, Mary, when my work will be complete in glory and you shall come to me in my ascended state and there you can embrace me, there when the work is done but now there is more work to do, more work for me, I must go to my Father and more work for you, Mary, go to my brethren. There's work to be done." And that too is a lesson that we have to learn spiritually so often, isn't it? We want to when we have those moments, those beautiful moments of, oh, would to God they were more often, of sacred encounter with Jesus. We want to abide there. We want to say with Peter, "Lord, let us set up tents here. Let us stay here." But Jesus says to us, "No, you must leave the mount of communion. You must go back out into the valley. You must do my work. You must spread my name. You must declare my Gospel. You must evangelize the earth. You must go to all nations. The work is not yet done for you. The work is not yet done for me. I must continue to minister to you from heavenly places."

That leads us to a third reason and that is the urgency of delivering the Gospel message. "Arise, Mary. Touch me not. Arise. Go to my brethren and say unto them I ascend to my Father, your Father, my God and your God." You see, literally in the Greek it says, "but be going. Touch me not but be going. You can't stay here, Mary. I've got other people in need. You can't be self-centered, Mary. You must be other-centered when you receive the

Gospel." So Jesus is teaching Mary here what those four lepers had to learn on that day they found great spoil. In 2 Kings you read that they said, "This day is a day of good tidings and behold our peace, if we tarry until the morning light some mischief will come upon us." And isn't that true that when we know the love of God that passes all understanding, we are under divine obligation to spread the news to others, to go and say, go and tell. And in such cases, you see, going is better than touching. Carrying Christ's message is more honorable than staying at his side. Mary experienced fellowship, now she must witness. Fellowship is fruit eaten, witnessing is seed sown. Both have great value, both complement each other, but the one must follow the other. "Arise, Mary, go tell."

Then finally implicitly I believe here that Christ desires to test Mary whether she will indeed surrender as we heard this morning, her all in love to him, and she does. The good news is that she does. She goes. You read it in verse 18, "Mary Magdalene came." She obeys. She willingly submits. There is no word of complaint. She learns her lessons well. She accepts what the Lord has told her to do and she accepts the mild rebuke that when her emotions are kindled, most kindled, she is prone to make mistakes. She bows under these instructions. She bows under Rabboni and she receives the commission the Lord gives her.

That's really what it is, verse 17b, it's a commission, isn't it? We read not only here about lesson for her heart, but also commission to her heart. Jesus says, "Go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." Now what's remarkable here is that Jesus in his first appearance of his resurrected form, begins immediately to speak about his ascension. I don't know if that's ever struck you but it's quite an amazing thought. He's just beginning to reveal the first state of his exaltation and he's already talking about the second. You see, Jesus sees in his own mind this inevitable connection between resurrection and ascension. He's resurrected to ascend. He's not resurrected to abide here. It's only 40 days, it's just a temporary thing to wean his disciples and then he's off the glory to do the work he's called to do.

Literally in the Greek it's in the ongoing sense, the beginning present time. Literally it says, "Go to my brethren and say unto them, I am ascending. I am ascending to your Father and to my Father." It's as if Jesus is already going up. It's so present tense, it's so connected. The change has already begun. "I no longer have an earthly body that needs food and drink. I have an earthly body but it's a glorified body and it doesn't need food and drink. I will soon be the glorified Christ. Mary, you must bring the message and I choose you, Mary. Not the other women, they got a different message, they should say go and tell my brethren, I'll meet them in Galilee. But I choose you, Mary, to be the announcer of my ascension into heaven."

Mary is the only one that gets this great privilege. Isn't that amazing? This is the crowning blessing that Mary receives. She alone has this message, "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and to your God." One old divine put it this way, this is the crown of Mary's life to receive this special commission. This is Mary's distinctive task, her distinctive work, and then he goes on to compare all the distinctive works of the

different Marys in the Bible. He says Mary the mother of Jesus had her distinctive transaction when she believed the word of the Lord and all generations call her blessed. Mary, the sister of Lazarus, had her peculiar work when she poured the precious spikenard on the head and feet of Jesus and her memorial is worldwide. But Mary Magdalene is entrusted with the honor of announcing the ascension of the Lord Jesus, a lofty message to the apostles and for all generations to come. This is her crown, this is her honor, this is her commission.

"Go, Mary, go and tell them I am no more the man of sorrows but the King of glory before whom the gates shall give way and I shall enter in. Tell them, Mary, that we have one Father and one Spirit, for he that is joined to the Lord is of one Spirit. Tell them, Mary, that I shall intercede for them that they may all be one. Tell them that I am their elder brother, bone of bone, flesh of their flesh, born for adversity, able to meet all their needs and wants in glory. Tell them that I and the risen conqueror over death and I have led captivity captive and I shall make them all conquerors through me. I shall ascend to their Father and to my Father. Go tell my brethren." What a beautiful commission. "Go to my brethren and say to them, I ascend unto my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

We can't skip over that word "brethren." You see, Jesus is talking about his departure but as he talks about his departure, he talks about his brethren, his oneness with those who will follow him, those who are bound to him, those whom he will represent in glory, those whom he will minister to from glory and so he calls them brethren. Now the word brother is a tender title. If you have very good relationships with your brothers, your fleshly brothers, you will be able to identify with the tenderness of this title, but even if you haven't had the relationships with your brothers in the flesh, you get some feel of it, don't you, that there is a spiritual brotherhood between Christ and his people that is very very tender. When Christ began his ministry, he called his disciples his servants. Later on he called them disciples. Still later he called them friends. But now when he arises from the dead, he calls them brethren because, you see, they were planted together not only in the likeness of his death but also raised together in the likeness of his resurrection. There's a sacred union between Christ and his people, a brotherly union.

I was reading yesterday in one old divine and he had three or four pages spelling out this one very beautiful thought, he said the resurrection of Christ happened X number of years ago, now it's 2,000 years ago, and we don't know when the final resurrection will be, in our mind they are two separate things. In God's mind through sacred vital union with Christ, they are, as it were, one piece. Organically the church is raised in Christ and God simply has to confirm that, the God who is timeless, whose yesterday and today and tomorrow is the same, God has simply to confirm that on the great day. But Christ's resurrection is therefore, you see, the sure pledge of our resurrection. That's our guarantee and that's our strength, that's our future, that's our glory. So we are brethren. We are brethren of Jesus Christ if we are true believers from the moment that Jesus arises from the dead.

Now to be sure, there are differences in our brotherhood. You know that Jesus is the only Son, he's the unique Son. He's the only begotten Son. His people are adopted sons. He is Son by generation, we if we are believers, are sons by regeneration. He is by nature, we are by grace. He is Son from eternity, we are made sons in time but we are still sons. Adopted children have the same place in the family. They get the same privileges. They get the same love.

Brethren. "Go tell my brethren I'm going into heaven. I'm going into heaven not as someone who simply looks down on them but I'm going into heaven as their firstborn brother, their older brother. I'm going to heaven to represent them. I'm going to heaven as the brother of sinners who trust in me. I'm the brother of the richest princes on earth because they belong to me." Brethren. It cannot even be said the angels are his brethren. This is a lofty thing, friends, an intimate thing, a glorious thing, a beautiful thing, an astonishing name. Hebrews 2:11 puts it so beautifully, "He is not ashamed to call them brethren."

And what makes this so wonderful, so surprising, is because we are so unbrotherly to Christ. The amazing thing is that all our unbrotherliness to our brotherly Savior does not unbrother us from his brotherhood. He is steadfast in that brotherhood. He's got an unconditional love in that brotherhood. He feels blood ties, spiritual blood ties with his people. It is a beautiful brotherhood that he has paid for with a price of his own blood.

"I will declare thy name," he says, "unto my brethren." Oh, it's through that brotherhood that we learn to say, "Abba, Father." It's through that brotherhood that we learn to be adopted into the family of God. And it's through that brotherhood that we learn to treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ; that we learn the dreadfulness of not treating each other as brothers and we learn to be embarrassed and ashamed and convicted by our own unbrotherhood to our spiritual brethren and sisters. It is through his brotherhood that we learn to say, "I believe in the communion of saints." It is through his brotherhood that we learn to have love cover a multitude of evil. It's through his brotherhood that we learn to bear with one another.

"Go tell my brethren." In Christ's brotherhood really is everything we need spiritually, experientially. It's all there. Martin Luther once said this, "If Christ is now our brother, I should like to know what we still lack." Would you meditate on that, dear children of God? Would you meditate on that for a while? If Christ is now our brother, I should like to know what we still lack. What a gift. What a gift this brother. You see, he's not just a wise brother, he's not just a wise counselor like a good brother is, he's a saving brother. He's a representative brother. He's an..... prophet brother, priest brother, king brother. I should like to know if he is our brother, what we still lack.

When you feel indebted to someone, you want to do whatever they ask of you. Mary owes her whole life to Jesus. She is made willing not only to learn the lesson of our text for her own heart and to receive the commission of Jesus at heart, but to obey from the heart. She's transformed. She's transformed into a willing servant and so she goes to be what Ralph Erskine calls a female preacher, not an ordained preacher, of course, but she

goes to bring the good tidings. She goes to break open into the rule of the disciples to say, "I have seen the Lord." Yes, to say more, "He is ascending and he's going back to your Father and to my Father and to your God and my God."

One old divine puts it this way, "Radiant with superlative joy, she sails like a ship filled with precious cargo into the place where the disciples are gathered and she unveils it all." She tells them all, verse 18, "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her." You can just see her, can't you, full of excitement. She blow-by-blow, word-by-word she tells everything, every detail, as only a woman can do. Every detail and the disciples hear it all. They hear it all.

I think she had a three pointed sermon. Really. The reality of the resurrection, "I've seen the Lord." The assurance of brotherhood and fatherhood, "He will go to our God and to your God as our brother." And then the promise of ascension, "He will go. He's ascending. It's beginning, as it were, now and it will happen. He will go to represent us." You see, every word she has to say is a priceless heavenly possession. It's a treasure. Bearing this message was for Mary a light and an easy yoke because she spoke what she knew and she testified what she had seen.

Oh, what unction she must have had to speak and how precious the message was. Ascension is such a wonderful message and yet so few people realize it. So few people realize it. I had a college professor once who said ascension makes no sense that Christ would leave. The poor man. Ascension is our life because in heaven he teaches me through the church, his nursery, through ministers, through prophets as the prophetic teacher. He teaches me through the Scriptures. He teaches me through good books. He teaches me through the means of grace and as priest he intercedes for me moment-by-moment so that I cannot fall away, and as king he rules and guides over my life in every detail. He's doing everything for me as an ascended Lord. What a glorious message.

Now the result, of course, will be that the people, the disciple will rejoice, don't you think? They will rejoice with joy unspeakable. Christianity is valid after all. All who have doubts and fears are misplaced. There is joy. There is faith. There is victory. No, sadly, sadly you read something astonishing. Mark 16:9-11, "Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not." How those words make you shudder. Believed not. The very apostles to whom this woman came with so much conviction in such a clear message straight from the mouth of Jesus.

What a blow. What a blow to this woman. What a disappointment. And what lessons we can learn from this. May I close this afternoon by giving you a few of these lessons? The first is this, that Mary Magdalene and all who joy, experiences a grief of all those who labor in the kingdom of God. What a disappointment the ministry often is. What a burden. What a sorrow to experience with Isaiah, "Who hath believed our report?" Do you have any idea, congregation, what it is to be a minister of the Gospel, to be filled

with a message that God poured into you all week long, to spill it out on Sunday morning with all your heart and all your love and all your desire, and you walk off the pulpit and you walk by people who are talking about other things. Do you understand what goes through your heart week after week after week? "Lord, Lord, who has believed our report?"

Oh, Mary is grieved, of course, and the worst thing is the disciples put themselves above Mary. They won't believe this woman. They think of her as Magdalene still, the one out of whom the seven devils are cast. They forget that she's a messenger of Jesus Christ.

Oh, dear friends, it's not just ministers. Yes, you know what it means to be filled with Christ and to long with passion to speak to your husband, your wife, your children, your parents, your friends, strangers on the street about the things of Christ and you get rebuffed and they turn the subject aside. You know something of what it means to be a minister. You know something of the sorrow, the grief that they believed not. But even greater is that grief when God's own people believe not. Oh, what a sorrow in the heart of a minister, what sorrow to fill the soul, that God's own dear people don't receive the faith of the word of God.

The second message, the second lesson rather, that we get from this message in being rejected is the high calling of the service of Christ. The high calling of the service of Christ. Christ put such value on Mary's commission that he would rather have her be the messenger of good but rejected news than to abide with him to the satisfaction of her own senses. Do you know what Matthew Henry says about this? He says, "Public service ought to be preferred over private satisfaction." Even when it's rejected, Mary is still doing the right thing, and even in that rejection as sorrowful as she is, there is still joy, the joy of knowing that she is in the way of the Lord, and I assure you, I think every faithful minister on the earth will agree with me, that if it weren't for that joy, there would be many a time when a minister could not go on, could not go on, but by that joy and by that strength of knowing that you are in the way of the Lord even if no one believes your report, you may go on. You may go on, you must go on. Do you know what that means in your own field of labor, your own relationship? Public service ought to be preferred over private satisfaction.

Thirdly and finally, we learn from this portion that Christ is not pleased with the unbelief of his disciples. Mary had to learn lessons from this too. I think about it the other way, what if everyone had believed her and everything had been wonderful? Would Mary have become the hero? Would she have become the woman who brought the message of the ascended Christ? God keeps her low but that doesn't mean that Christ is pleased with the disciples' response. He's angry with it. We read three verses later, Mark 16:14, and Jesus "upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen." He upbraided them. It's a strong word. He rebuked them but thanks be to God he didn't cast them out. He upbraided them but then embraced them. He forgave them for all their hardness of heart, for all their unbelief that brought so much darkness upon their own soul. And what a blessing that all our unbelief by which we bring, and I put myself right in the foreground with you, I bring upon

myself so much darkness to my own soul through my wretched unbelief that Christ has to upbraid me for it too. But what a blessing that he doesn't cast us out for our unbelief, for our crisis honoring unbelief. He upbraids us and then he embraces us.

Oh, how gracious he is but dear unconverted friend, you are in a state of unbelief. A state, not just a condition, a state of unbelief and soon Easter will be behind you again, it could be your last. Whom seek you? Why do you seek the dead among the living? Why don't you seek first the glorious person, the only person that can meet the needs of your soul. If you seek the world, you will perish with the world. If you seek the Savior, he says that those who seek him and drink of him shall never perish. They who thirst for him shall never thirst again. He can give you what you need. Oh, ask him for it. Wait on him for it. Beg him for himself and for his salvation. Amen.