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How to Let Go and Pray Like Jesus
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Since today is the last Sunday in the Easter Season, let's look back to the Gospel reading from Easter Sunday, because it was pointing to today's Gospel and how to live as followers of Jesus after his resurrection and ascension.

If you recall, Easter Sunday's Gospel began very early in the morning, when it was still dark, like the creation stories when God made the world and everything in it. In that early morning newness, one woman, Mary Magdalene walked to the tomb where Jesus' dead body had been. Of course, we know when she got there, the tomb was wide open and empty, and she ran to fetch Peter and another disciple, who all ran back to the tomb, where they left Mary alone when they saw it was empty. Angels appeared and talked to Mary, then the Risen Jesus himself appeared and she couldn't recognize him until he called her by her name. It is a wonderful moment. Then Jesus said something that we sometimes struggle to understand because it was Jesus teaching Mary and us how we are to live with the gift of resurrection life.

"Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I'm ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Most of the time Jesus words of not holding on to him are interpreted as Jesus telling Mary to restrain herself from physically touching him. Because we often interpret holding someone as a physical embrace like a hug, snuggle, or cradling a baby in our arms. But the phrase may not relate to physical contact, because Jesus also talked about his ascension, which the Church observed on Thursday. This means, Jesus' words are probably more like the now iconic song *Let it Go* the character Ilsa sang in the 2013 Disney movie *Frozen* that many of us have heard, either because of grandchildren, children, or you grew up with it. The song and movie are about how Ilsa let go of her fear of harming others with her magical gift of creating snow and ice so that she could receive the love of her sister and through that love, her gift was transformed into something that made life richer, better, and more magical for her, her family, and her kingdom.

In his way, Jesus was telling Mary it was time to let go of what everyone thought they knew about Jesus so they could receive something richer and deeper than his parables and miracles: resurrection life through the Holy Spirit.

How was Mary supposed to let go? Ilsa got a whole movie full of adventure to figure it out. How can any of us learn to let go of what we thought we knew or understood about Jesus, the church or each other, so that we can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit which will help us grow closer to Jesus and each other?

That is where today's Gospel comes in; where we find Jesus at the end of his long speech to his disciples the night before his arrest, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection. This speech was Jesus' first steps at letting go of his earthly ministry and his disciples. They were no longer going to be with him all the time. He was no longer going to travel around telling stories and healing people and upsetting the status quo. Things were about to change, and Jesus had to not only let go of the way things had been, but he was also trying to prepare his disciples to do the same.

You might notice Jesus ended his speech with a prayer. A powerful one that reveals Jesus' relationship with God as one of intimate trust, which is why Jesus calls God not father in the patriarchal sense, but Abba, which translates more affectionately, as Poppa, or Daddy.

Biblical scholar and theologian N.T. Wright observed in this prayer Jesus was celebrating that his work on earth had come to its end; he'd done everything God sent him to do. Wright also observed Jesus made a few requests. One was to be exalted, which is not the same thing as being a celebrity. It has to do with God keeping God's promise that the Messiah will be lifted up to be with God so that the new life, or new creation, God promised to send to the earth can begin. It is more about the transition from Jesus' earthly ministry to living with resurrection life in the world. The other request Jesus made was for God to watch over his disciples, who Jesus obviously cared about. It could not have been easy for Jesus to let go, so he turned to God for help.

We often assume letting go means forgetting about someone or something or choosing not to care anymore. But that is not what Jesus was talking about when he told Mary Magdalene not to hold onto him or when he prayed this prayer. Letting go doesn't mean throwing something or someone away. Letting go simply means giving someone or something into God's care. It doesn't mean not loving, it just means relinquishing the obligation of responsibility or managing or attempting to control an outcome, person, ministry, or relationship so that a new kind of relationship can form. It's a type of growth that even Jesus experienced and is part of resurrection life.

It's like the growth that often happens when children grow up and go off to college or move out of their family home and make more decisions themselves and learn how to be responsible for those decisions. Parents need to let go and so do adult children; but that doesn't mean they don't love each other. Of course they do. The

love doesn't stop, it changes or transforms into a new kind of relationship. Often, if the letting go doesn't happen, and parents try to control their adult children or the adult children rely too heavily on their parents to make important life decisions like choosing their major, vocation, job, or spouse, it can cause problems that could harm their relationship. It is also the kind of change professors and students make after graduation, when a former professor and student can become friends or colleagues.

This is the same kind of transition parishes and priests need to make when a priest leaves. As we are experiencing here at Church of the Good Shepherd right now, it is not easy to let go, which is why we are given this time together. Some priests and parishes really struggle with this change, so much so there are some strict rules about what a former rector can and cannot do after they leave a parish. At first, such rules might seem harsh or overly strict or controlling, but they are intended to help remind both priest and parish that things change, and those changes are often for the better. We can still be part of each other's lives. We can still be friends on Facebook and follow one another on Instagram. After I start at St. Matthias, you all are welcome to visit us in Minocqua, Wisconsin. In fact, I hope you do.

This change does not negate the relationship or ministry we've created in our 8 years together. In fact, what we've done together will always be part of us, for better or worse. Like Jesus in his prayer in today's Gospel, that is something to celebrate, because it is something that gives God glory.

Another thing we can learn from Jesus that applies to us today is to pray like Jesus by trusting God and trusting each other to God's love and care. As we continue to transition, we will need to both celebrate and let go. We will do well to remember letting go doesn't mean ignoring or not caring. It means feeling sadness, it means allowing God to transform our relationship, and make room for whatever the future holds without trying to force that future to be what we might want it to be so that we can let it be what God wants.

When we can do this, we will begin to see resurrection life is right here with us. The Holy Spirit has never left us, but in times of transition it can be more challenging to recognize it. Which is why Jesus was so wise to pray, and we would be wise to follow his example. If we do, we might realize, like we might also see in today's Gospel, Jesus has been praying for us all this time. Alleluia.