

Teach My Heart Not to Cling

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Scriptures: Isaiah 43: 16-21 Philippians 3: 4(b) - 14 John 12: 1-8

It is not often that I preach a sermon taking exception to a line in one of my favorite hymns. I've always loved the line that says: "I see thy Cross; there, teach my heart to cling." This week, my study of scripture makes me wonder, "Does Jesus really want that?"

The prophet Isaiah directly quotes God as saying: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Change is always a challenge, perhaps never more obvious than on the Sunday right after the clocks are set forward for spring. As a small illustration, I clearly recall a Sunday while in was in Seminary. I went to hear my friend, Tom Vining, preach. Student ministers often get field assignments. That Sunday, Tom had one and I did not; so I visited. The particularly neat thing was that he was a Methodist and I, a UCC student, had never visited a Methodist worship service.

It was the first Sunday of the month, Communion Sunday. I entered and took a pew near the rear of a satisfyingly packed church. We sang a

hymn and, almost right away, Tom started a Communion liturgy. I recall thinking, “How unique, the Methodists have the Communion first, before the sermon or anything else.” When the offering and the benediction followed, I glanced in confusion, for the first time, at my bulletin. Sure enough, this was the week the clocks had all been set ahead an hour – all but mine.

This was my first introduction to how unwise it might be to cling to old patterns of thought and behavior. Although this lesson and its parallel to God’s Word in Isaiah may seem direct, some might argue: “Yes, but the new thing God was making for Isaiah, is *our* old thing: the coming of the Good News in Jesus.

Perhaps so, and Paul even reinforces that take by confessing how all the proud things to which he might have clung were worthless. God’s new act, seen in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, trumps everything.

Even so, I kept coming back to the Gospel lesson. Jesus defends Mary’s costly gift, remarking that she should keep the remainder of the perfume for His burial. No one, except maybe Judas, dreamed that burial would be so soon. Then, my attention was drawn ahead to that scene with Mary and Jesus just outside the empty tomb on Easter Sunday.

She'd come with that perfume because there had not been time to anoint Jesus before the Sabbath. She feared they wouldn't let her in to his body, but the stone is rolled away, the soldiers have fled, and the body is gone!

Seeing a man, Mary assumes he is a gardener and asks where the body of Jesus has been taken. Then, Jesus just says her name, "Mary." Jesus once said "the sheep know the voice of their shepherd," and Mary knows Him! She does what I would probably have done; she runs to him, hugs him, and doesn't want to let go, lest He slip away again.

And that is when Jesus gently teaches a very hard lesson. He says, "Mary, do not cling to me for I have not yet ascended to my Father." God has brought salvation in Jesus; yet, Jesus does not want Mary to cling to even that. Now, God is doing a new thing again, and it is her turn to run to her friends and tell them that, **"JESUS IS ALIVE!"**

A few might argue, "Well, Mary cannot cling to Jesus because He was not yet ascended, but He is ascended now; surely, we can cling!" That lawyer's answer misses the spirit of the text, it misses the Holy Spirit. We have the past. We treasure the past. Yet, we cannot cling to the past lest we abandon both the present and the future. We see Thy Cross there. Now, we have a job; go, run to tell everyone: "Jesus is risen; he is risen indeed!"