A few years ago, a friend visited Hope on a Sunday morning. He knew many of you and I watched from a distance as he hugged, high-fived and threw his arm around people. Everything was big and physical and full of love. I was awed and envied his confidence and comfort with people. He filled up the room with encouragement and laughter and touching and hugging and big handshakes and more touching…

I’m socially awkward. I like my physical space. And, I’m never sure if we’re supposed to shake hands or hug, so I often hang back or hide. After the post service ritual at the sanctuary door I typically beat a hasty retreat to my office. It’s easier to fall back than to pull people in. I’m not a big toucher. I’ve been waiting my whole life for social distancing.

The rules are clear.
You stay over there and I’ll stay over here.
There’s no touching.

When I was a high school teacher not being physically expressive was a helpful trait. But, I think there are moments as a pastor when I should be quicker to hold a hand, offer a hug, put my hand on a shoulder. Bodily expression of human emotion is essential, normal, and even life giving.

When Mary recognized Jesus, she must have reached toward him, or tried to hug him, because after speaking her name, the first thing that Jesus says is, “Do not hold onto me…” or, “Don’t cling to me…” depending on your translation. And actually, a more literal translation would read, “Don’t touch me…”

It is a decidedly odd response. Mary loved him, was grieved by his death, confused by the empty tomb, and now he was standing in front of her. Even I would have the sense to reach toward him in that moment…. And, you would think even if Jesus wasn’t a “hugger” he would see her mix of astonishment, relief and joy and welcome her embrace. But, in effect, he says, “Keep your distance and go…”

Dear friends, what are we to make of this resurrection encounter?
What is encouraging and true for the living of these days?

It turns out there’s scant detail of what the resurrection looked like, or sounded like, or how it happened. If you’re looking for a substantive account of the resurrection you’re looking in the wrong place. In the gospels the detail is not in the moment of resurrection but in what happens when people encounter the resurrected Lord.
Barbra Brown Taylor gets at it this way:

_He could have stayed put, I guess, sitting there all pink and healthy between the two piles of clothes so that everyone could come in and see him, but that is not what he did. He had outgrown his tomb, which was too small a focus for the resurrection. The Risen One had people to see and things to do. The Living One’s business was among the living…. Every time he came to his friends they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring. Every time he came to them, they became more like him._

_Those appearances cinch the resurrection for me, not what happened in the tomb. What happened in the tomb was entirely between Jesus and God. For the rest of us, Easter began the moment the gardener said, “Mary!” and she knew who he was. That is where the miracle happened and goes on happening – not in the tomb but in the encounter with the Living Lord._

Our text features Mary’s encounter with the living Lord.

Mary hailed from Magdala, which historians speculate was near the north shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus healed her of seven demons and the traditional interpretation is she was also the woman of ill repute who poured perfume on the feet of Jesus, kissing and wiping his feet clean with her tears and hair….

What’s clear is that Mary of Magdala stuck close to Jesus. When the others abandoned him, she stayed close to the cross and while the others slept she got up before dawn and went to his grave. Even after Simon Peter and John went back she stuck close.

With the tomb empty Mary didn’t go back home, contact the authorities, or go looking for him, but as the daylight pushed back the darkness she stayed by the tomb door and wept. She had no idea how to stay close to Jesus when she had no idea where Jesus was….

She had no idea where Jesus was until Jesus came to her.

Dear friends, the resurrection stories swing not on the disciples finding the resuscitated body of Jesus but on Jesus finding the stumped, scared and struggling disciples. Jesus is the one who comes to them, initiates contact, and pushes back the darkness to be seen.

For example:

Mary mistakes him for the gardener until he says her name.

The two walking the road to Emmaus don’t recognize him until he breaks bread and disappears.

The disciples, locked in the upper room, are terrified until he appears and shows them his wounds.

Thomas doesn’t believe a word of it until Jesus does the same for him.

Even his friends on the beach don’t know it’s him until he tells them where to catch fish.
You get the point. William Willimon puts it this way:

*The scriptures don’t report early Jesus sightings; they describe Jesus’ appearances. It’s an important difference. Resurrection revelation is entirely in God’s hands, it is something God does.*

And that seems like an important distinction. Whatever the resurrected body was the appearance of Jesus to his followers required his initiative and his activity. That’s not to dispute the resurrection, but it is to suggest that what happened in the tomb doesn’t seem to be a matter of attention or intention for the gospel writers.

Again, Willimon:

*In resurrection God not only defeats death but also overcomes the limits of human perception and relationship. The first result of resurrection was not eternal life for us but rather appearance to us, revelation.*

And that is to say that God comes to us. Like sunlight pushing back the dark God would push back our dimness, and not bound by death but loosed and alive, come to us. God comes to us.

How have you seen the living Lord?
How has God come to you?
- God comes to us in the long love of a friend.
- God comes to us in unexpected unearned forgiveness.
- God comes to us in some support even in life’s hardest losses.
- God comes to us in the life of his gathered community.
- God comes to us in the circle of an AA meeting.
- God comes to us in a still small voice.
- God comes to us in acceptance for who we are.
- God comes to us in the restless-relentless notion that this world was made for a Kingdom and not an empire.
- God comes to us in this ancient text.
- God comes to us….

Dear friends, the good news of Easter is found not only in how Jesus unwrapped the burial cloth and put on a gardener’s cloak, but in the Living Lord who comes to us and calls us by name.

Nadia Bolz-Weber writes about it this way:

*In the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we see that God is for us and with that we can no longer be defined according to death, a religion-based worthiness system, or even the categories of late-stage capitalism. We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken, and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near. Nothing else gets to tell us who we are.*
So, what then of this tender exchange where Mary reaches toward Jesus and he responds to “Don’t hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father, go instead to my brothers and tell them…”

Maybe Jesus means here don’t hold on to this body, or this moment, or the mystery of how all this happened. Again, it’s not about the resurrection it’s about the encounter.

Which is part of why I like the translation, “Don’t cling to me…”
- Don’t cling but go…
- Don’t cling to my body but go and tell the others.
- Don’t cling but go and bear witness to what you have seen.
- Don’t cling but go and celebrate that death is defeated.
- Don’t cling but go and live without fear.
- Don’t cling but go…

Dear friends, the good news of the whole sweep of scripture is encapsulated in the resurrection accounts: God doesn’t abandon us to sin or darkness or death but God comes to us. Even in the uncertainty of these days, even in a time of pandemic and economic disruption…
- Don’t be afraid. God comes to us.
- Don’t be afraid. Listen for God calling your name.
- Don’t be afraid. The Lord is risen and loose in this world.
- Don’t be afraid. Our comfort is not that we cling to Jesus but that Jesus has hold of us.

For, “I have seen the Lord!”
Alleluia.
Amen.