

EASTER SERMON 2014

Easter Sunday, Portsmouth Cathedral

“Do not hold onto me.”

One of the most puzzling moments on that first Easter morning, a day that is not without its fair share of incomprehensibles all round, is this moment when Jesus, recognised by Mary after his resurrection, says to her “do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to my father”. Mary has just gone from the depths of grief to the depths of relief and joy at finding that someone she thought was dead is actually alive. Unsurprisingly she steps forward to embrace him – an instinct that I’m sure that most of us would share under the circumstances. Certainly my instinct in that situation, would be to take hold of the person I love and never ever want to let go of them again. So for Jesus instantly and abruptly to say “do not hold onto me” is a strange, even rejecting thing to say under such circumstances.

And yet the sentiment, harsh as it may feel, is familiar to me as a parent, as a bishop and as a husband and friend. Teenagers, as they begin to forge their identity and need their independence, might want to express this sentiment to parents who are so concerned about their well being that they end up smothering with emotional closeness and physical protection. “Give me space to become the adult I need to be” they are saying. “Do not hold onto me.” And maybe you’ve had that same experience in your most immediate relationships – with a partner or a close friend, or perhaps at work, when one of you feels swamped, needing the other to step back so that you can both breathe and become whole.

In my experience although it can hard to receive the instruction, hard to be told that we’re imposing or holding too tightly to someone we love, this plea “do not hold onto me” always heralds growth. It is a signal that a person we love needs space to forge ahead with a new reality, a new phase of existence, and it can be both deeply frightening and profoundly life giving.

This Easter morning, Jesus emerges out of the tomb – a miraculous enough feat, and one worthy of celebration and thanksgiving. But his instruction to Mary should give us pause to reflect that this isn’t the end of the matter. Jesus still has work to do, still has transformations to effect. He has not yet ascended to the Father, not yet carved out the place he is preparing for Mary and for all of us to join him in his newly resurrected life. Easter Sunday marks the beginning of a new set of possibilities, and with it a new set of fearful and exciting mysteries, as the newly resurrected Jesus goes ahead of those he loves, forging the possibility of our shared new life in him.

So this Easter Sunday, and in the weeks of celebration that lie ahead, we approach the risen Jesus with huge love and huge hope. But we also approach him recognising the depth of the mystery that this day represents. “Do not hold onto me”, pleads Jesus. Do not kid yourselves that you can fully understand me, fully own me, fully keep hold of me. The risen Jesus meets us today to draw us outside the best of our understanding, to summon us into new life. So do not cling to him, do not try to draw him back into your world. Listen to the fresh claims he is making upon your life, and dare to follow into a future that may feel strange and daunting, but that can only ultimately be good and life-giving.

+CHRISTOPHER