

The Resurrection of our Lord, Easter Day

Eastered Body, Eastering Bodies

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**Analysis by Cathy Lessmann with Jim Squire
(Based on Bob Bertram's 1990 Easter
Crossings Newsletter Article)**

John 20:1-18

1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together; but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the

other at the feet. 13They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17Jesus 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 am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Author's note: Trying to summarize Robert Bertram is not easy, so I offer this summation of what I THINK his "crossing" of this Easter text would look like, with trepidation. I encourage you to read Bob's entire article that was printed in a Crossings Newsletter Easter, 1990, and decide for yourself. Look up www.crossings.org, under "Library," Robert W. Bertram. All quotes are from this article. Thanks also to Jim Squire for his considerable assistance.

DIAGNOSIS: Static Cling

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Clinging to Jesus' Body*

Easter morning: Mary is weeping outside the empty tomb, totally distraught, thinking that Jesus' body has been stolen, when suddenly he appears in front of her. He calls her by name, she recognizes who he is and, apparently (as most women are wont to

do upon encountering a precious, supposedly-lost individual) reaches out and “clings” [the new translation is “holds on”] to him. But Jesus surprisingly responds: “Do not cling to me [yet],” or, in other words, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” Less explicit in our text is the implication that not only is Mary doing something she shouldn’t be doing, but that she is also not doing something she should be doing. Jesus himself gives her an assignment, seemingly to take her mind off the clinging, but really enlisting her in his ministry: to bring the good news of his resurrection to others. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that our text makes no explicit connection between the resurrection and the environment (the world, the very creation itself, which Paul assures us in Romans 8:19 is “waiting with eager longing”), the garden in which this scene takes place and Mary’s own nurturing instincts in coming to the tomb in the first place (tending properly to the body of Jesus, not only for the body’s sake, but also for the sake of the environment) make it clear that the creation that has been “subjected to futility” (Romans 8:20) should be on Mary’s (and every Christian’s) To-Do list. No doubt he would really prefer she not be distracted from this ministry by her clinging to him.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Premature Cling*

To be fair, it is natural that Mary would cling to Jesus and not want to let him go. She can’t help be distracted because she needs to cling. After all, he had been gone (dead), and now is back (alive)! She has already experienced loss, grief, emptiness, and now she “has” him back and she yearns, naturally, to hang on to him. After all, he’s a “bird in the hand, a sure thing.” Clinging will assure that she won’t be left empty-handed all over again. There’s no time to spend on the ministry he wants to give her, both to her (and his) brothers, but also to creation. But Mary’s clinging is premature. It assumes that if

she lets go and allows Jesus to go on up to heaven (wherever that is), then he won't be on earth (bodily) for her (us) any more. That type of clinging distrusts Jesus' promise that he has something more to offer Mary and other would-be clingers. Her need to cling to the un-ascended Jesus not only is unfaith on her part, but it can be devastating to creation. At the very least it leaves the creation in the hands of one who is not its creator (the one who subjected it to futility) and will use it for purposes it was not meant for. This earth was put in our care, and our lack of faith in the Creator is expressed in how easily we give dominion over to the Creator's enemy.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal problem) – Terminal Bodies

Mary's kind of clinging is betrayed in many modern theologies as well, and maybe even shows up in some of ours. Mary doesn't realize that to cling to Jesus' body is to settle for a body that can, like Lazarus', always die again. That in turn means having to settle for her (our) own biodegradable, terminal body as well: a body subject to the earth's curse and death. The fate of creation, the deterioration of the environment becomes our own fate and deterioration. We neglect the world, and the world's creator neglects us. All of this stems from our selfish clinging to the savior before he has fulfilled his mission. Clinging to less than the ascended Jesus means we are deprived of his life giving meal, and what we've clung to disintegrates, leaving us with nothing.

PROGNOSIS: Clinging for Dear Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Eastered Body

The good news of Easter began with the good news that "the Creator, the very Center of all, moved in with us" earthlings. Jesus assumed not only our fleshly bodies but also the earth's curse and death, yet survived it, "still an earthling and still God." Consequently he returns to the Godhead very different from

the way he left: He has a body. Not bad for an earth that had been “subjected to futility” as well, but now gets to participate in a new creation. One could say that his becomes the first body that makes it all the way up to deity! Moreover, this is the earth functioning as it was originally intended to – yielding one of its occupants to his true home. Mary (and we) can shout, “One of us has made it!” THAT body is no longer terminal, but now “wondrously recycled through the death of his cross, through his open sepulcher and into the very bloodline of the Trinity.” (See: the creation is HIS again – “his cross”, “his sepulcher”) “That being so, that one of our kind of earthling has made it all the way to Godhood, we can be sure that that flesh of ours, now deified in Christ, is no longer the old garden variety, biodegradable body.” Wondrously, Jesus begins to refer to his disciples and followers as brothers and sisters, (he tells Mary, “Go and tell my brothers”); meaning, they (we) have become part of his family—God’s family. Upon returning to the Godhead, Jesus brings his new sisters and brothers along with him and presents His Father with new offspring, “himself as one of us.” These siblings, indeed, blood relatives of the very Son of God, become God’s junior deities – “vast connections for such small earthlings!” As for the present creation, there are various opinions as to what will happen to it in the end, but one thing we know for sure: it is – even if only in moments like these – once again marching to the beat of the Creator’s drum, and Satan’s dominion over it is beginning to crumble.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Eastering Bodies*

Gutsy believers like Mary trust that Jesus’ own Eastered body guarantees the eastering of their own bodies. Jesus ascends in order to return, this time as nourishment intended to revive terminal bodies. NOW is the time to cling to His body – his

flesh and blood – “for this body and blood is no longer terminal like ours. The Eucharist is not cannibalistic magic. This flesh and blood is for the life of the world forever.” “Take it!” all are urged, take it by faith, take it bodily as you eat and drink. This imbibing “may come as a shock to the system, but only as life is a shock to death.” Gutsy believers also begin to use creation in a gutsy manner, but one it was intended for. Elements of creation – bread and wine, typically made from yeast congregating on plants and grapes grown on vines and trees – are used by the Creator’s Son to give us life that lasts forever. These seemingly insignificant elements have been elevated to a grand status indeed, and the rest of creation, though still waiting with eager longing, has some reason for hope.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Clinging for Dear Life*

The reason that Jesus didn’t want Mary to cling YET becomes clear, but now, the invitation is universal. All are invited to cling to the Eastered Jesus – cling for dear life, cling and live. Just as God is a Geo-phile – an earth-lover – so too do we become equal lovers of his dear environment – which includes other earthlings. When earthlings cling to Jesus, they feel at “home” in the cosmos (as opposed to “lost in the cosmos”). “Any home of his is home for us.” Taking his lead, we begin to use God’s creation for life-giving purposes – most importantly in ministry to other static clingers, both those who cling to too small a Jesus and those who cling to false messiahs. Instead of squeezing thrills out of the environment for our own clingy purposes, we nurture the environment so that the earth is not robbed of its unique Christ-life-giving qualities. Even so little an activity as fermenting grapes carefully for many years is a hint of the nurturing capability that Christ brings out in us. After all, they are HIS grapes, HIS yeast, HIS cup of Life. We are most definitely at home in HIS meal, especially when we

share it with the world.

Here follows a portion of Bob Bertram's 1990 Easter Article for the Crossings NewsletterC is for Cling, as in "Do not cling to me." (John 20:17)

So says the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. Not that she should not "touch" him, as the older translations put it. In fact, in the very next scene he literally dares another of his followers to touch him, nailprints and scar and all. What he is saying to Mary is, Do not hold onto me...yet, "because I have not yet ascended to the Father." His glorification was almost completed but not quite. Now, at this last moment, was no time to hold him back. Not only for his sake but for Mary's a well. There would soon be time for real clinging, quite bodily clinging. But to cling now, just short of the finish, would be settling for less than the whole resurrection. To cling to only this much Christ was premature, static cling. The risen One was finally out of the woods and on the home stretch, precisely for his clingers. They must not stop him now, so close to home.

Why could Mary Magdalene not let go? For the same reason none of us can. This Christ to whom she clung was, to put it bluntly, a bird in the hand, a sure thing. Let go of that and you're left empty-handed all over again. Mary Magdalene knew about such emptiness and the cynicism it breeds. At least this risen Jesus in the garden was still her kind of flesh and blood. Who knows what would become of him were he to leave her now and, as he says vaguely, "ascend to the Father?" At least this Christ in Mary's arms was still bodily the way she was, as bodily as her "Rabbuni," as bodily as any garden variety gravedigger or – aye, there's the rub – as bodily as any resurrected Lazarus who could always die again. Still, rather

to have and to hold him here and now than to give him up to heaven, wherever that is.

There are whole theologies that think as Mary did. And don't we all? If Christ is in heaven, so we assume, he is not on earth. Or if he is on earth he is here only as divine, "personally" maybe but no longer as one of us. Bread and wine? Sure. But flesh and blood? God with a human body? Here and now, still? In the Lord's Supper? Once he's gone off and "ascended?" That sounds suspiciously like a "line" you've been handed before if you've ever been jilted. Mary Magdalene had reason to cling. But our Lord had better reason for her not to cling, just yet.

O is for Our, as in "our Father."

Said the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." In fact wasn't that how Jesus' Father became also our Father, by Jesus' presenting God with a new offspring, himself as one of us? He ascended back to the Father the same Son of God as always, yes, but this time as the Son of God made flesh, our flesh. The Son whom God had earlier sent into the world came back very different from the Son who had left. In the meantime he had become every bit as human as he always was divine. This was the Son, the evangelist tells us, who had snuggled "in the bosom of the Father." (Jn. 1:18) (How motherly of God to have a bosom.) Faith can imagine God now welcoming the Son back, "My, how you have changed, and really for the better; how like dear Mary Magdalene you now are and like all her dear flesh and blood siblings; on you they look good; any Parent of yours is delighted to be a Parent of theirs."

An old Christian confession urges us to "rejoice without ceasing" because the Christ who now reigns at the right hand of God is "our own flesh and blood." (FC-9) That being so, that

our kind of earthling has made it all the way to Godhood, we can be sure that that flesh of ours, now deified in Christ, is no longer the old garden variety, biodegradable body that Mary Magdalene was willing to settle for in the graveyard that morning. That was why the risen Lord urged her not to cling just yet. True, the flesh and blood he bears is still ours, thank God, but now wondrously recycled through the death of his cross, through his open sepulcher and into the very bloodline of the Trinity. It was a good thing that Mary Magdalene, gutsy believer, let him go when she did. He has never been the same since. Nor has God. Nor have we.

That is why Jesus on Easter morning could now begin calling his disciples his siblings. "Go and tell my brothers," he says to Mary Magdalene, who also would now become his sister. That is the first time in the whole long Gospel of John that Jesus referred to them in that family way. The God to whom he was about to return, but now return as one of them, would thereby become their Parent as well. And they would become God's junior deities and the very Son of God's own blood relatives. Pretty vast connections for such small earthlings as us!

I is for Intake, as in "Take and eat, this is my body," "Take and drink, this is my blood."

Or, as Jesus is quoted in the Gospel of John,

Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world...Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise [her] up on the last day. (6:51,54)

To this flesh and blood, dear Magdalene, dear gutsy believers, feel free to cling – this flesh and blood which has risen not just from death, like Lazarus, but into God and back to us

again. For this flesh and blood is no longer terminal like ours. The Eucharist is not cannibalistic magic. This flesh and blood is for the life of the world forever.

This body of his is meant for clinging, for dear life. "Take" it, we are urged. Take it on faith but take it quite bodily, into our own hands, to our lips, into our weak and mortal bodies. It may come as a shock to the system, but only as life is a shock to death. Take it for what it is worth, the death and resurrection and the joy forever of the offspring of God. Easter morning is happy, yet not as happy as it gets – on all the mornings after, in the Eucharist. And even that is only a foretaste of the feast to come.

G is for Geo-phile, which means Earth-lover.

G could as well stand for God, the original Geophile, who, as the evangelist says, "so loved the world." This year, 1990, the world celebrates Earth Day in the same season that Christians celebrate Easter. That figures. For a God who not only creates earth but whose only-begotten becomes an earthling personally and bodily, sharing the earth's curse and death and surviving it still an earthling and still God, and all in order to nurse the poor earth back to health on his own flesh and blood – such a God must surely qualify as one tough environmentalist.

Not only ought we follow suit with godlike love of the environment, as if we were the center and everything else were our surroundings. No, we are the environment. To God, we are, who is the center around whom we gather, we and the sun and moon, the dew and frost, the lightning and clouds, the beasts and cattle, the whales and all who move in the waters. Then why do we prefer to distance ourselves from the rest of God's environment? Is it merely because we are self-centered? Isn't it rather that we are self-centered because, as Walker Percy

puts it, we feel “lost in the cosmos” and so feel threatened by the rest of creation? Yet isn’t that also why the Creator, the very Centre of all, moved in with us, at home in our flesh, Christ the earthling? Ever since, any home of his is home for us.

Robert W. Bertram