

Rich Lusk  
Sermon notes

Last week I preached on the first half of John 20. This week, we'll finish the chapter. But before we get to that, pastoral intern Jeremy Sexton has written a nice little meditation on the meaning of John 20:17, one of the most difficult verses in the chapter:

Jesus' comment to Mary Magdalene in John 20.17 seems somewhat enigmatic to us. John writes, "Jesus said to her, 'Do no cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.'"

So what did Jesus mean by "Do not cling to me"? A bigger question is, What does the ascension (specifically, the fact that the ascension hasn't happened yet) have to do with his forbidding Mary to cling to him? It just seems like a weird verse at first glance.

Before we try to tackle the verse, we first need to remember the typology of the passage: John is presenting Jesus as a new Adam in a new Garden of Eden (John 20.15), and he is presenting Mary Magdalene as a new Eve in this garden (notice, for example, how Jesus and the angels keep referring to Mary as "Woman," which is what Eve is called in Genesis 2--Adam didn't actually name her Eve until the end of Genesis 3).

With that in mind, we can now see that John 20.17 is an allusion back to Genesis 2.24: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave [or, cling] to his wife." Ironically, though, while Genesis 2.24 says to leave father and mother and cleave to wife, Jesus tells Mary NOT to cleave to him because he has to LEAVE and go to his Father first. The same ideas and language seem to be present in Genesis 2 and John 20, but they've been jumbled up.

In light of the modern-day silliness about Jesus and Mary being married, which manifests itself both in "biblical" "scholarship" and in the pop culture ( e.g., *The Da Vinci Code*), it might be appropriate to mention that John 20.17 actually points away from a literal marriage between Mary and Jesus: "Do not cleave to me," Jesus tells Mary. Nevertheless, the marital imagery between Jesus and Mary (who is both a new Eve and a type of the Church in John 20) is real, but it points typologically *beyond* Jesus and Mary to the marriage of Jesus and the Church (cf. Eph. 5:22-33). And this marriage, this cleaving, between Jesus and his Bride, couldn't really begin until Jesus ascended to the Father. Mary (and the rest of the disciples) had to learn that her relationship with Jesus would be transformed by the coming of the Spirit.

This episode with Mary ought to remind us of another episode (a few chapters earlier in John) in which some other followers of Jesus also want to hang on to Jesus rather than to let him ascend to his Father. In John 16.5-6, the disciples are filled with sorrow when Jesus tells them, "I am going to him who sent me." They don't want to see Jesus go. In John 16.7, however, Jesus gives his disciples the rationale for why he can't "cleave" to them just yet: "It is to your advantage that I

go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper [that is, the Holy Spirit] will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." And this is the point in John 20.17. Mary, like the disciples in John 16, wants to hold on to Jesus, to keep him here on earth; she doesn't want to lose him again. However, it is not quite time for Jesus to cleave to his followers (=his Bride). In fact, unless Jesus ascends to his Father, the Holy Spirit will not come and fully unite Jesus to his newly purchased Church-Bride in marriage. Of course, Jesus did ascend to the Father, and ten days later, on Pentecost, he sent the Holy Spirit, who unites Jesus and his Bride in marriage. The Holy Spirit comes as the "matchmaker," bringing Jesus and his people together forever.