

**FOLLOWED, NOT GRASPED**  
***Sermon for Easter B:Jn 20:1-18***  
LPC, 4/12/09

Who is this Mary Magdalene in today's Gospel lesson? Chances are that what you may have heard or read about Mary Magdalene is trash, or it least unfounded.

Novelist Dan Brown, in his bestseller *The DaVinci Code*, describes Mary Magdalene as Jesus' consort and the mother of his children, ancestress to a direct bloodline of Christ that continues into the present day. This "truth", according to the *DaVinci Code*, has been suppressed by a jealous Vatican. This is good fiction, no more.

But a lot of what the church has taught is no more founded in scripture than this. Church tradition has identified Mary variously with the woman taken in adultery (there is no biblical basis for this), with Mary of Bethany (there is no biblical basis for this), or most commonly, with the prostitute who washes Jesus' feet on the last day of his life. Sorry, but there's no biblical basis for this either.

Some scholars believe that Mary Magdalene, far from being a woman of ill repute, was a woman of wealth and influence, who financially supported Jesus' ministry. There is no biblical basis for this either, but that doesn't make it any less likely than the other alternatives we've been offered.

What we know about Mary Magdalene from Scripture is that she really loved the Lord. Furthermore, she remained faithful to him while his other disciples betrayed, and denied and deserted Jesus. She would not have been allowed into the Temple court, where Jesus was condemned, because of her chromosomes, but she followed Jesus to his death, remained at his side while he died, and attended his entombment. And she is first on the scene when the Passover is over, to attend to the details of his burial that may have been ignored in haste as the Passover feast approached.

There, Mary Magdalene, mourning bitterly for Jesus, encounters the risen Lord but doesn't recognize him until he calls her by name. She is amazed and overjoyed. We can imagine her rushing toward him with open arms, but Jesus tells her, "Don't hold on to me."

"Don't hold on to me"? What kind of a thing is that to tell someone who loves you? Doesn't Mary deserve to hold on for a little while? No one has loved the Lord more than Mary. Doesn't she deserve to hold on?

It's not a matter of deserving. She is just not to hold on. She is not to grasp. Jesus himself says so.

Here's what I see as one possible meaning here: When we have grasped Jesus, we are on the wrong track. When we think we have grasped Jesus, it's not Jesus in our grasp. When we think we understand exactly what Jesus is or was or did or taught with all the implications for everyone and for all time, we are wrong.

Jesus is not to be grasped. Jesus is not to be fully understood. There is mystery here and we need to approach our assumptions and understandings about Jesus with some humility.

Let me try to put this in a pithy, memorable way: Jesus was nailed down once and he sure as heaven isn't going to let that happen again. We need not to grasp, but to give Jesus the freedom to move around and bring about God's kingdom as Jesus will. And Jesus will.

Look at the story of Jesus' life. Jesus is always moving around. Born in Bethlehem, taken to Egypt, raised in Nazareth, during his earthly ministry he moves from place to place: to Galilee, to the Jordan, to the wilderness, to Samaria, to Bethany, to Jerusalem, climbing mountains, crossing the sea, withdrawing to lonely places. And although he does take frequent times out to pray, he emerges from them telling the disciples, let us go into the surrounding villages and preach the kingdom of heaven.

So here's a secondary message for us, to be derived from the commandment not to grasp. Not only are we not to try and nail Jesus to our own ideas about him, we are to follow him into the surrounding villages (figuratively speaking) and preach, by word and/ or example, the kingdom of heaven. And the kingdom of heaven, as this congregation should know by now, is where the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and the captives are set free. More than that we need not grasp.

We are not to grasp Jesus; we are to follow Jesus.

Dear old Mary Magdalene doesn't just grasp the idea of the risen Christ to herself, as wildly comforting as that might have been. She follows Jesus out of the Garden to tell the disciples she has seen him alive. They don't believe her, as we later find out, but that's not Mary's concern. She has followed, not grasped.

Let me give a more modern example. There was an old lady who was confined to her bedroom. I knew this lady, or someone very like her. She had led a long and good life, and was assured of God's love and her place in heaven. She didn't grasp this assurance to herself however. She didn't grasp, she followed. She continued to follow Jesus, though her legs no longer would carry her anywhere and lay atrophying beneath the covers of her bed. How did she do this?

She prayed for her family and friends. She took the prayer list provided by the church she could no longer attend, and she prayed for each person by name. She asked her visiting nurse about the nurse's other patients, and she prayed for them. She watched the news on TV, and prayed for victims of crime and war and natural disaster. She prayed for criminals and terrorists and world leaders and all the little children of the world. She prayed for animals and for the vanishing rain forests and the melting ice caps and the shrinking ozone layer. Love poured from this woman toward the world as long as she had breath. She followed her Jesus into all the surrounding villages she knew, and he took her with him, right to heaven.

Jesus is to be followed, not grasped. When followed, not grasped, Jesus literally shows the way to heaven.