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Holding on to the Giver

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“Do not cling.”

I've been musing on those post-resurrection words of Jesus, spoken to Mary in John's gospel account. The occasion is one of almost unimaginable joy - seeing someone you watched be cruelly and unjustly killed only a few days before, and suddenly he is standing before you, whole and tangible and real, speaking your name with tenderness and love. How can she not want to cling, to hold on so Jesus will never leave again?

“Do not cling.”

Is Jesus being harsh, spoiling the moment of celebration? No. The reality is that joy cannot be kept. Gifts from God are given to us to treasure but not to hoard. Rather, they become lenses through which we see the world and our lives in transformed ways. C.S. Lewis's autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, makes this point. His youthful attempts to hang on to the thrill he experienced in imagining transcendent moments transformed when, as a Christian, he realized that what he'd been seeking was God. The joy of that “transcendent thrill” was not lost, but Lewis could stop trying to cling to it and instead trust God for all moments of his life.

The gospel account of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, revealed for a short time in all his divinity, makes the same point. Peter wants to build a booth to keep this moment permanent. But the light of

transfiguration fades, and they have to head down from the mountaintop, as we all must do.

Clinging to anything, even to joy, turns us into hoarders, manipulators, users of people or things or situations in our attempts to own what cannot be owned. To cling to something—a person, a moment, a situation, a possession—is ultimately to kill it, whether through smothering, manipulation, obsession, greed or over-control. That kind of clinging is mistaken on two points.

First, it mistakes the gift for the Giver and thus focuses on the wrong thing; and second, it assumes that I am in charge as creator and maintainer of my own world. And I am not. It is God who is the source of all joy and who knows me much better than I know myself. I can feel sadness or fear as I let go—but I need to let go. And it is then that the mystery happens: for in the letting go, God is able to give shape to the next part of the journey.

“Do not cling.”

The words have become a prayer for me. I *do* hold onto Christ, who is my savior and my guide. But everything else I want him to hold for me so that I always know who is the giver and source of all joy. I cannot cling to joy, but God, who is true joy, will shape my life more fully than anything I could manufacture or imagine.