

## ARE YOU CLINGING TO JESUS?

Easter Sunday

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Many of us can probably name a very small number of teachers who stand out in our lives as the most influential ones: perhaps four or five, spread out over the span of our years in school and the various settings in which we were taught. For me, there are five: my sixth-grade teacher, my tenth-grade English teacher, my college trombone teacher, my preaching professor in divinity school, and my tutor in my doctoral program. This morning, I want to tell you about the first one, my sixth-grade teacher, for reasons that will soon become clear. You may have heard me mention him in the past, but whether you have or not, his impact on me pertains precisely to the Easter Story as we hear it in today's Gospel.

Phillips Muckle was my sixth-grade teacher at the Willow Road School in Franklin Square, NY. In those days we still had just one classroom teacher in the sixth grade, and Mr. Muckle was my first male teacher. My classmates and I all knew on Day One that this was going to be a very different academic year than any we had experienced previously.

Mr. Muckle was a Caucasian man from Troy, New York, about forty years old, with a crew cut and a trim moustache. Front and center on his desk was a large statue of the Buddha. In his very first remarks to us, he said that he was a practicing Buddhist, and that meditation would be a part of each day of class. Just to prove it, he gave us our first meditation lesson right there and then!

So began a truly memorable year. Meditation was indeed practiced each day, with Mr. Muckle seated at the front of the class in the lotus position. Behavior issues were addressed with meditation as well: there was a meditation corner for those who needed time-outs throughout the day. Before long, our desks were moved from the traditional rows to groups of eight, including the Hearts and Flowers Group, consisting of four boys and four girls that Mr. Muckle believed to be couples. (Yes, I was one of the boys!)

Above all, though, Mr. Muckle challenged us with points of view that were different from what we were used to and he wanted very much for us to have points of view of our own. It happened to be just at the time in my life that I was first seriously considering ministry, which was not something I felt comfortable sharing in school. It was a very different time, and Mr. Muckle would have had to contain himself in today's academic world. But my off-beat, counter-cultural Buddhist teacher gave me room to feel okay with being different, and with the idea that being in religious life was a valid choice for a person to make.

Here's an example of how much impact he had. I still remember the day that he taught us the difference between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. "Both types jump over the wall from the world into the monastery," he told us. "Both types do a lot of meditating. But Theravadas stay in the monastery, while Mahayanas jump back over the wall to the world to serve those in need." I was so struck by it; it imprinted me for life. I recognized it as a Christian issue, too: does spirituality keep us inwardly focused, or does it point us out to love and serve the world?

Of course, the truth is that ideally it does both. But there are many ways in which our spiritual lives can become too familiar, too routine, and can keep us from remembering to jump back over the wall to serve in the world. The issue is present in today's gospel lesson.

Mary Magdalene, who at first did not recognize the risen Jesus at the empty tomb, knows him when he says her name. Listen again: “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.’” (John 20:16-17a) We can imagine Mary in this moment, recognizing Jesus and appreciating the magnitude of what she is witnessing, about to rush towards Jesus, ready to hug him with joy; but Jesus stops her – “don’t hold on to me” or, as several translations have it, “don’t *cling* to me” – go to the other disciples and share the news with them. Mary leaves Jesus and goes.

“Don’t cling to me.” Lent and Holy Week are behind us. They were a period in which we rightly turned in, to examine ourselves, to repent of our wrongdoings, to amend our lives. This is the day that we finally get to celebrate, to experience once again the miracle of rebirth. It’s natural that we should want to simply enjoy the presence of Jesus freed from the suffering and death he just endured. But on this very day, on the first Easter, Jesus warns us against doing this without remembering to turn around to love and serve the world. “Don’t cling to me.”

This directive has never been more important. It may seem farfetched to say this in 2021, but it is still a temptation to cling to Jesus, to take comfort in our spiritual lives only and choose not to turn and face the world’s suffering. The pandemic has brought us face to face with racial and economic injustice, climate change, spiraling gun violence, and much more. Yet many are averting their eyes from the suffering of their neighbors and jumping back into pre-pandemic lifestyle choices. There is new language about vaccinated “oases” and unvaccinated “deserts.” Yet air travel is back to pre-pandemic levels. “Live it up if you can” is a far too prevalent attitude. I expect that most of us have indulged in some of this if we are honest with ourselves.

This behavior is much more than premature. It is turning away from the lessons of the pandemic and returning to behaviors that contributed to it to begin with: behaviors that in some cases cannot be resumed. Some of us may be sheltered from the suffering of our planet. But we must seek to escape that shelter, including the shelter of any false solace we may find in a spiritual life that forgets to jump back over the wall to serve the world.

No, we must not cling to Jesus. He asks us to remember, on this most joyful of days, that his example points us to a life in which we lay down our lives for others, just as he did in an ultimate way for all of us. Yes, we are right to revel in the miracle of this day. But nothing happens if this is all we do. Lent is over. Jesus is alive. There is a world to love and serve and work like mad to change, knowing that he is with us. We need to keep our hands and hearts and minds open, knowing that it is his love that clings to *us*. It’s our job to carry it everywhere we go. If we keep it for ourselves, it’s not really the love of Jesus at all.

Easter blessings, dear friends. Let’s love and serve the world together, in memory of our Risen Lord.