

Easter

It is peculiar that when Jesus meets Mary Magdalene at the tomb, he tells her not to touch him. Mary Magdalene was one of Jesus' most faithful disciples. You would think that when Jesus and Mary were reunited, they would embrace in joy at his victory over death.

But Jesus not only tells her not to touch him, but implies that there will be a time when they can touch. He says, "Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended to my father." What is this strange comment of Jesus about?

He seems to say: Do not touch me now but touch me later—do not touch me while I am here; touch me once I have gone away. What is Jesus attempting to say?

His meaning is certainly obscure. But there is a saying in biblical interpretation: the obscure is an opportunity. The things we do not first understand are an opportunity to think more deeply, to investigate and discover a meaning we never expected.

This is what I would like to explore with you on this Easter—to answer the question, why does Jesus tell Mary "Do not touch me now"?

To answer that question, I am going to call upon the services of one of the giants of Western Art—the Italian artist, Giotto. Everyone knows that a picture is worth a thousand words. About 700 years ago Giotto painted a resurrection scene. You will find on the back the bulletins which you received coming into church. I would ask you to look at the picture now. How has Giotto presented Jesus' resurrection?

On the left-hand side of the painting you see two angels. They are rather chubby and contented. They are sitting on a rosy marble tomb. Since this is a resurrection story, we presume the tomb is empty.

At the base of the tomb you see the soldiers who have been assigned to guard the tomb. They are fast asleep. To the far right, you see the risen Jesus, dressed in white. Kneeling on the ground in a maroon cloak is Mary Magdalene.

Here, Giotto has illustrated the very question we are trying to answer. Mary Magdalene is reaching out, trying to touch Jesus. But Jesus, with a gesture of his hand, is resisting her.

How can this painting by Giotto assist us today? Because (with apologies to the DaVinci code) I believe that Giotto has hidden in this picture the answer to our question.

I would like you to notice three details in the way he has drawn the figure of Christ. If we can appreciate them, I believe we can not only answer our initial question but also come to a deeper understanding of the resurrection and how it applies to our lives.

The first detail to notice is that Jesus is drawn holding a banner. You see it flying gently in the breeze, emblazoned with a cross. The banner is a sign of victory. Of course, it is the victory of Christ. But victory over what? We usually answer: Jesus' victory over his death.

But the victory is much bigger than that. We believe that the resurrection of Jesus is the first step in God's victory over the evil in our world—the first step in the establishment of God's kingdom.

What Easter is about, what Jesus is about, what our faith is about is a God who is opposed to evil and is determined to eliminate evil from our midst. I mean all evil: the evil of poverty, of violence, of hatred, of suffering, and even of death.

God intends to establish the kingdom. When that kingdom comes all evil will be destroyed. Jesus' resurrection is the first step in that cosmic plan. The banner is a sign of the victory that in Christ has now begun.

For the second detail, look at Jesus' foot. See how it reveals the slant of his leg beneath his robe. You can see by that slant that Jesus is moving, moving away. At this moment he is pressing up to the very edge of the picture. With one more step he will be gone.

Where is he going? He tells us himself that he is ascending to the Father. We know that Jesus is not going to be gone forever. We believe that he will return. He will return to complete the victory over evil and to finally establish God's kingdom.

But until he does return, the victory over evil is not complete. As Jesus ascends to the Father, we must admit that for now evil remains in our world and in our lives. It can touch us and the ones we love. Until the time when Jesus returns, we will continue to experience poverty, violence, hatred, sickness and death. So, Jesus' foot points to his departure. It reminds us that at present the victory is incomplete.

The third detail is Jesus' hand. It is the most telling detail of all. At first glance it appears simply as a gesture to keep Mary Magdalene from touching him.

But look at how Giotto has drawn the hand. It is not a flat palm pressed as a wall between Jesus and Mary. It is an open hand facing downward. Where have we seen that gesture before?

We have seen it at confirmations and ordinations. It is the gesture of imposing hands. This gesture commissions a person, sets someone aside for a mission.

If Mary Magdalene were to be moved to the right one inch, Jesus' hand would be on her head. He would be imposing his hand upon her. Giotto has done here something that only artists can do. In one gesture he has captured two meanings.

One indicates that Mary should not touch Jesus now. The other commissions her for a mission. What is that new mission? To take up Jesus' mission of course—to carry on his work; to be in the world opposed to poverty, violence, hatred, sickness, and death. Mary Magdalene kneels here as our representative. In the resurrection Jesus commissions us to carry on his work until he returns.

Here we find the answer to our initial question. How will Mary Magdalene be able to touch Jesus after he has ascended? How can we touch Jesus before he returns?

We touch him by engaging in His mission. We touch Him every time we touch the poor, the suffering, the dying, the victims of violence and hatred. For He has told us whatever we do for the least of our brothers or sisters we do to Him. Until Jesus returns we are commissioned to touch Him in one another. In touching those we serve, we touch Christ Himself.

Look again at the whole figure of Christ. The whole Easter message can be found in his figure. That message is not limited to what happened to Jesus two thousand years ago. It outlines the pattern of our lives today.

The three central virtues of the Christian life—faith, hope and love—correspond to the details which we examined. Faith calls us to believe in the banner of Christ's victory, that the destruction of evil has begun and no force can turn that victory back.

Hope is what we hold to in this time when Jesus has ascended to the Father and when evil remains in our world. Love is our mission, our call to serve one another, to touch Jesus in the least of our brothers or sisters.

The whole Easter message is contained in Giotto's figure of Christ. It is a lot to absorb. In the picture, Mary Magdalene does not seem to see it.

She is still too busy trying to touch Jesus at the tomb. The guards are oblivious. They are asleep. But look at the angel on the far left. He is pointing to what he sees in the risen figure of Christ.

He is pointing for our benefit, lest we miss it. This angel is proclaiming the Easter message to us. Here is his proclamation: “You have **heard** the gospel. Here you can **see** the gospel. But now you must **live** the gospel. You must live it in faith, hope and love.”

He is risen, Alleluia! Amen.

