

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014 John 20:1-18 "Let It Go"

Every parent of every little girl has probably spent the past several months deeply immersed in a song.

One song. Over and over again. A power ballad from a movie about a girl who becomes who she is meant to be, although it is not what those around her think is her destiny.

Disney. Yes. Animated feature. Yes. You know what it is. "Let it go."

For all of you who are so tired of hearing this song for the four millionth time that you'll scream if you hear it again, here's the good news. I will not sing it for you. But I will quote the final lines of the song, which may not have registered with you, since you've been so driven to distraction by Idina Menzel's soaring voice:

*"Let it go, let it go When I'll rise like the break of dawn  
Let it go, let it go That perfect girl is gone  
Here I stand In the light of day Let the storm rage on, The cold never bothered me anyway."*

Sitting here on this Easter morning, the words land on our ears a little differently, don't they?

The idea of breaking away from a limited notion of who someone is, of what that person is supposed to do and to be, that there is something better, bigger, more magnificent, more fulfilling...it is at the heart of the movie "Frozen." But that movie is simply a retelling of a story that has been told for centuries.

We may think we know who someone is. We may think we understand them perfectly. We may, in fact, like the idea that we have marked them, categorized them, fit them into a box marked with their name on a shelf. We like to do that, because then we can manage them. We can pull them off the shelf whenever we want to talk to them, and we can put them back on the shelf when we don't. We control the relationship. But it is usually not really possible to control someone that way, as any parents of two year olds will attest.

For a long time, when I heard this passage from the Gospel of John, I focused on the heartbreak in Mary Magdalene's voice, the tension in her arm as she reached out to Jesus – not the gardener, but her beloved rabbi – as he said, "Do not hold onto me." When all she wanted was just to touch him again, to embrace him. To see him alive after that crucifixion, it was truly a miracle. He was back again. It would be alright. But now he was telling her not to touch him, and that was not the Jesus she remembered, who would hug little children, pat the hands of women and gently caress those who were sick. Not touch? How could this be? And how could he not want to touch her, his old friend, the one who served him so faithfully after her own cure? What was wrong?

It must have been so painful to her. And Jesus knew that, so he explained. He was going away for good, but he needed to tell his followers, and her among them, that he had indeed risen from the dead. He was ascending to heaven, but he wanted to make sure that the disciples knew that this was what was happening, as had been prophesied, so here he was to give her this message. And her task was to go tell them this.

Her task.

But these days, I find myself wondering why he said this to her, to Mary Magdalene. Why not Peter, the rock upon whom the church would be built? Why not John, the disciple whom Jesus loved? Why not the Pharisees, a final poke in the eye to say "see, I told you so?" Why Mary Magdalene?

Let's think about who she was. A woman who had been scorned by her husband and community because of her illness. Not a harlot – that was a detail that had been added to her story some six hundred years after her death and which has since been refuted. Perhaps someone who had a mental illness or complex medical issues. But a woman who was not only healed by Jesus but who became an "apostle to the apostles." A courageous woman who stood by Jesus when most all of the men ran away. Perhaps a visionary leader, if some of the Gnostic gospels are to be believed. Perhaps a mystic, if medieval legends have any merit...

But certainly not the most predictable choice of people to whom Jesus would appear to make the point that he had conquered death. But Jesus had made so many choices that were not the predictable ones. Jesus himself was not the predictable King of Kings. We should not be surprised.

So Jesus talked to her, this woman with the complex life story, and told her to go tell the others about their conversation.

And perhaps he used her as the one to bear the good news because she was a living symbol of how Jesus broke out of the conventions of their culture. She was no longer simply a scorned woman, a sick – and ritually unclean – woman, a follower after the disciples because she wanted to learn from Jesus when women were not encouraged to learn in this fashion. She was something more. A healed woman. A trusted and beloved companion. A person who could see something remarkable and listen to the words and understand what was happening. And so Jesus asked her to be the bearer of the good news of Christ. Risen, alive, to go to heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father. She was the one Jesus trusted to convey the message, the courageous one, because this was earth-shaking news and the messenger had to be the right one.

Jesus had broken out of the box of what would be expected. He had been crucified. His body died. They had buried him in the tomb. Days had passed. And yet he was alive, not dead. He was beautiful, strong, restored, and yet he was different...and on his way to heaven soon. Hard to wrap our minds around it, even though we've heard the story all our lives. How much more surprising it would have been to Mary Magdalene and to the rest of the disciples in that moment!

And when Jesus told Mary that she could not touch him, she could not hold him, he was also telling her that her holding him and touching him in the old way, in the way that one human being touched another, she would hold him back from being who he was truly destined to be – the son of God who is intended to sit at the right hand of his heavenly Father. She had to let him go, as painful as it was for her. She had to release him from the old box of his human existence.

But Mary Magdalene had broken out of the box of the identities that society had placed on her. As she let go of her old identity, she became the one whom she was destined to be, the bearer of the good news to the disciples. There can be no doubt that she was truly the perfect messenger.

Jesus keeps breaking out of the box that we try to keep him in. Jesus is not just the Sunday School sweet guy with the white robes and soft clean hair who loves kids. Jesus is also the one who argues for the care of those in need. Jesus is not just the person from two thousand years ago whom we think of once a week, barely. He is the ever-present, ever-living God among us. He will not be contained into the limited view that makes us comfortable. He will not be tamed. We need to let go of the small Jesus that we have constructed and let him be who he is: God, who conquers death and gives eternal life.

But the corollary to this understanding that Jesus, the Son of God, is larger than the box in which we try to confine him, is that we, too, can be larger than the way we believe we are expected to be. We can grow as Mary Magdalene grew, beyond societal strictures and conventions, beyond the names others gave her and others give us. She became a critically important part of the leadership of the early church. We can grow in the same way.

If you remember nothing from this sermon this morning, remember this: Jesus' rising from the dead is the sign that we have the capacity to do more than we dream possible, for God and for God's people. Let go of the old limitations. Let go of your fear.

Sing, as Jesus might have:

*"Let me go, let me go, I go on to God's right hand.  
Let me go, let me go, this is what you must understand.  
Here I stand In the light of day  
Let the whole world know, That death cannot hold me down anyway...  
That we can live in a better way."*

Sing it. Pray it. Believe it.

Amen.