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The meaning of "Touch Me Not" in John 20: 17

by David C. Fowler

Dr. Fowler, of the Department of English at the University of Washington, Seattle, addresses himself to the interpretation of the risen Lord's command to Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not", and adduces in evidence some material from his own field of study, thus providing an interesting contribution to the history of interpretation.

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father, but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken these things unto her.

John 20: 15-18 (AV)

THIS famous passage, describing the first appearance of the risen Lord to Mary Magdalene, is the emotional climax of the Gospel of John, a luminous scene, vibrant with a sense of sacred event. The truth of this was impressed on me recently as I was re-reading the gospel in its entirety in the Revised Standard Version. When I reached this particular passage, however, I felt that a false note was struck by the translators where Jesus says to Mary (20: 17), "Do not hold me," instead of the traditional "Touch me not." Thinking this might be a peculiarity of the RSV, I decided to check other modern English versions to see if there was any general agreement on how to translate the passage.

Of the dozen modern translations consulted, only three closely resembled the RSV. These were *The Twentieth Century New Testament* (Do not hold me), the Phillips translation (Do not hold me now), and *Good News for Modern Man* (Do not hold on to me). All the others had some variation of "Do not cling to me". These were Weymouth, Moffatt (who has "Cease clinging to me"), Smith-Goodspeed and Barclay (who have "You must not cling to me"), Knox (who has "Do not cling to me thus"), the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, the New American Bible, and the Anchor Bible.

The results of this survey were somewhat discouraging. For if "Do not hold me" struck a false note, "Do not cling to me" seemed

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible. The Gospel According to John*. 2 vols. New York, 1966-70.

well-nigh intolerable, and yet it appeared to represent a modern consensus for this verse. How do we account for this? I decided to consult the commentary on John's gospel by Raymond E. Brown in the *Anchor Bible*. The analysis by Father Brown turned out to be very helpful, both for its careful reading of the text, and its judicious evaluation of existing scholarship on the subject. In the following discussion I shall give some of the highlights of his interpretation, and at the same time offer comment of my own on the issues raised as they relate to the meaning of John 20: 17.

Our commentator looks first at Jesus' command, "Don't cling to me," from a purely linguistic point of view. He concludes that the use here of the present imperative (*mē mou haptou*) carries with it the literal meaning, "Stop touching me," probably implying that Mary is already touching Jesus and is being told to desist. But Brown is careful to add that it can also mean "she is trying to touch him and he is telling her that she should not" (II, 992). It would thus appear that linguistic analysis cannot be decisive, and must be subordinated to a study of the scene itself.

The traditional arguments in favor of the meaning "to touch" are disposed of in a single paragraph. Various difficulties are associated with this view. For one thing, it is often accompanied by an untenable belief that John's idea of the ascension was the same as Luke's. This leads to the difficulty of explaining why Jesus would forbid Mary to touch him, when a short time later he invites Thomas to probe his wounds (John 20: 27). Faced with this difficulty, commentators have proposed a strange assortment of explanations, some of them quite ridiculous, and Father Brown rightly rejects them. When he dismisses Chrysostom, however, as one of those "who think that Jesus is asking Mary to show more respect for his glorified body" (II, 993), I must strongly disagree. As we shall see, this is a far from adequate representation of Chrysostom's reading of the text.

The numerous emendations of the verse that have been suggested are, if anything, more extreme than the rationalizations of the interpreters. Among the proposed substitutions are "Don't fear" (*mē ptoou*, drawing on Matt. 28: 10 and Luke 24: 37), and "Touch me," a startling revision achieved by simply eliminating the negative *mē*. Others try to achieve the same result without actually tampering with the text, as when Morris translates, "Don't (fear to) touch me," on the grounds that the idea of fear is implicit in seeing a dead man who has come back to life. Brown rejects all of these efforts, and I agree. They are interesting, however, as testimony to the widespread uncertainty that commentators have experienced in dealing with this crux.

Another way to approach the problem, of course, is to look at the appearance to Mary Magdalene in the larger context of gospel

witnesses related to John 20: 14-18. In Matthew, for example, the two Marys encounter Jesus as they are returning from the tomb (Matt. 28: 9-10):

And as they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, All hail. And they came and held him by the feet, and worshipped him. Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.

In the appendix to Mark, however, it is the Magdalene alone who is said to have encountered the Lord (Mark 16: 9-11):

Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not.

It is very likely, of course, that these parallels have influenced the interpretation of John 20: 17. One can see this in the effort to read "Touch me not" as "Do not fear," and I think particularly in the translation "Do not cling to me," which Brown links explicitly to the verse in Matthew (28: 9) telling how the women held Jesus by the feet. But before we can use the synoptic parallels in this way, we need to reach a conclusion about their relationship to the fourth gospel. Brown decides that all three (Matthew, Mark, and John) represent independent lines of testimony (none being derivative) and further concludes that the narrative in John is the "longest and most meaningful account" (II, 1003). With this I am in agreement. Both Matthew and Mark seem entirely reportorial, containing none of the immediacy of phrasing that we find in John, whose version seems more like an eye-witness account. But if this is true, then we should be all the more reluctant to use verbal evidence from Matthew and Mark to add to the precision of John's narrative.

This brings us to a fundamental question. Is the passage in John an eye-witness account? And did Mary Magdalene actually encounter the risen Jesus, and mistake him for the gardener? Brown is inclined to regard the story as "Johannine dramatization" (II, 1004), but at the same time he is careful to mention with respect the suggestion of C. H. Dodd that this scene records an actual experience. Dodd says:

This story never came out of any common stock of tradition; it has an arresting individuality . . . I cannot for long rid myself of the feeling (it can be no more than a feeling) that this *pericopé* has something indefinably first-hand about it.²

I am convinced that Dodd is correct. There can be no doubt, in my opinion, that John's is an eye-witness account from Mary Magdalene; no intermediaries need be posited, for we are informed (20: 18) that

² C. H. Dodd, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: an Essay in Form-Criticism of the Gospels," in *Studies in the Gospel* (R. H. Lightfoot volume; Oxford, Blackwell, 1957), pp. 9-35, esp. pp. 18-20.

Mary told the disciples, presumably including John, who tells it to us. This conclusion inevitably has an important bearing on how the story is to be read. We must be prepared for what Dodd calls "psychological subtlety," and we must give full attention to human feeling in the scene, as opposed to theological or thematic elements.

Although Brown regards the episode as a "Johannine dramatization," his interpretation of Mary Magdalene's state of mind is by no means insensitive (II, 1010):

One is tempted to theorize that by using this "old" title [Rabboni] the Johannine Magdalene is showing her misunderstanding of the resurrection by thinking that she can now resume following Jesus in the same manner as she had followed him during the ministry. (Below we shall see that such a concept may lie behind her grasping him and seeking to hold his presence.) Also one may wonder if her use of an inadequate title does not imply that only when the Spirit is given (vs. 22) is full faith in the risen Jesus possible. However, such reasoning is made less plausible by the fact that in 18 Magdalene announces to the disciples, "I have seen *the Lord*"; and so she knows that it was her Lord and not merely her teacher who stood before her.

Here the commentator walks skilfully but precariously between the conflicting interpretations suggested by "Rabboni" and "Lord". But it is not easy to be neutral, for if the state of Mary's mind suggested by "Rabboni" is rendered less plausible by the subsequent occurrence of "Lord," then it is difficult to invoke the former title in support of the idea that she was clinging to him.

Brown dismisses the oft-repeated comparison of this scene with that involving Thomas as irrelevant, and in this I am persuaded he is correct. He then comes to his fullest and most considered statement of the meaning of Jesus' command (II, 1012):

When Magdalene sees Jesus, she thinks that he has returned as he promised and now he will stay with her and his other followers, resuming former relationships. He had said, "I shall see you again, and your hearts will rejoice with a joy that no one can take from you" (xvi 22). Magdalene is trying to hold on to the source of her joy, since she mistakes an appearance of the risen Jesus for his permanent presence with his disciples. In telling her not to hold on to him, Jesus indicates that his permanent presence is not by way of appearance, but by way of the gift of the Spirit that can come only after he has ascended to the Father . . . Instead of trying to hold on to Jesus (not, of course, that she could actually have prevented his ascension), she is commanded to go and prepare his disciples for that coming of Jesus when the spirit will be given.

This is an impressive resolution of the problem. Brown goes on to point out that John's understanding of Jesus' ascension differs from the concept of an ascension after forty days found in the book of Acts. Hence "I am not yet ascended to my Father" means that he is in the process of ascending to glory, after which he will come and give the gift of the Spirit. This is what Mary is to tell the disciples. In the next scene, when he appears to the disciples, he is the glorified Jesus who gives the spirit (20: 22; cf. 7: 39). Is the first scene then a pre-ascension appearance? did Mary see something less than the

glorified Lord? Here is Brown's answer: "[John] is fitting a theology of resurrection/ascension that by definition has no dimensions of time and space into a narrative that is necessarily sequential" (II, 1014). Therefore "I ascend unto my Father" (20: 17b) "is a theological statement contrasting the passing nature of Jesus' presence in his post-resurrectional appearances and the permanent nature of his presence in the Spirit" (II, 1015).

The whole analysis is enlightening, particularly in relation to the larger Johannine conception of the resurrection just discussed. Nevertheless I do have reservations about Brown's conclusion regarding the Magdalene's state of mind. I find it difficult to believe, humanly speaking, that she was able in a flash to come to the theological conclusions imputed to her in exegesis. This is a matter which, I submit, has an important bearing on the translation of Jesus' command, *mē mou haptou*.

In my opinion there is a dramatic progression in the scene from ignorance to knowledge. When Mary first recognizes Jesus by the sound of his voice, she believes that he is alive, that he did not die after all. Admittedly there is no reason for her to think this; but it is a perfectly human reaction under stress, somewhat akin to the common experience of the bereaved person who dreams that a recently departed friend or relative is still alive. In this state of mind, and with an expression of joy, she exclaims "Rabboni!" and rushes to greet him. At this point come Jesus' enigmatic words: "Touch me not!" Magdalene obeys the command; she does not touch him. But his abruptness awakens in her the awareness that Jesus intended: she knows that her eyes have seen the risen Lord.

We need not look too closely for the reasons behind Jesus choice of words here. According to Kraft,³ he was cautioning her against ritual defilement, but this seems to me a more explicit solution than is necessary. The most I am inclined to say is that the command meant literally "do not touch me," that Mary obeyed it, and that as a result her eyes were opened to the truth. The idea that she was clinging to Jesus at this moment I reject out of hand, although of course I cannot provide objective reasons for the feeling that lies behind this conviction. In the context of the entire episode, it simply does not ring true.

In such delicate and subjective matters, perhaps one can only appeal to tradition. So far as I know, for nearly two millennia the command of Jesus has been understood to mean "Touch me not." It seems implicit in the Latin Vulgate, where Jerome translates "noli me tangere"; in the Old English glosses of the Lindisfarne gospels, which read, "naelle thu mec gehrine"; in the Wycliffite Bible, which

³ H. Kraft, "Joh. 20, 17," *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 76 (1951), 570.

has "Nyle thou touche me"; and in all subsequent English Bibles down to the twentieth century we find some form of "touch me not."

An even more revealing source of information is the biblical drama of the middle ages, where often the popular understanding of a passage of scripture is spelled out in dialogue. In the *Chester Resurrection*,⁴ for example, Jesus addresses Mary Magdalene (I am modernizing the text):

Mary, touch not my body!
for yet I have not been
with my Father Almighty;
But to my brethren go thou in high
and of this thing thou certify
that thou hast soothly seen.

Several of the plays, notably in the Towneley cycle, *Ludus Coventriae*,⁵ and the Cornish *Ordinalia*, draw on the parallel from Matthew 28: 9, where the two Marys hold Jesus by the feet, but it is noteworthy that they do not allow Mary Magdalene to touch Jesus, in so far as we can tell from the text. Here is the dialogue in the *Towneley Resurrection*:

MARY M: Rabboni, my Lord so dear!
Now am I whole that thou art here,
Suffer me to nigh thee near,
And kiss thy feet;
Might I do so, so well me were,
For thou art sweet.

JESUS: Nay, Mary, nigh thou not me,
For to my Father, tell I thee,
ascended have I not;
Tell My brethren I shall be
Before them all in Trinity
Whose will that I have wrought.

The most imaginative treatment can be found, I think, in the York Winedrawers Play (no. XXXIX).⁶ The scene opens with a lyrical lament by Mary, who prays for a sight of her Lord:

O Thou loving One in every land,
Thou who shaped both day and night,
Sun and moon both shining bright,
Grant thou me grace to have a sight
Of my Lord, or else his messenger.

Jesus appears as the gardener, rebukes her gently for weeping, and asks whom she seeks. A conversation ensues in which the gardener

⁴ *The Chester Plays*, ed. Deimling and Matthews, 2 vols. London, 1892-1916. (Early English Text Society, Extra Series, nos. 62, 115).

⁵ *The Towneley Plays*, ed. England and Pollard. London, 1897. (Early English Text Society, Extra Series, no. 71).

⁶ *The York Plays*, ed. Lucy T. Smith. Oxford, 1885.

hints that Jesus is nearby, and Mary asks him urgently to show her the body. He replies :

What would thou do with that body bare
That buried was with baleful cheer ?
Thou may not salve him of his sore,
So many and deep his wounds they were.

Then he goes on, by way of consolation, to tell her that Jesus will rescue mankind from sin.

At this point Mary is given a speech which is designed, I believe, to acquaint the audience with her state of mind, and to emphasize the earth-bound tendency of her sorrow :

Ah! might I ever with that man meet,
The which is so mickle of might,
Dry should I wipe what is now wet;
I am but sorrowing for worldly sight.

In response to this Jesus reveals himself to Mary and shows her his wounds (as he will also do later to Thomas). There are no stage directions, of course, but it would appear from the dialogue that although Mary recognizes Jesus, she does not take in the significance of his wounds; in other words, she rushes to greet him as if he had not died. Here are her words :

Ah, Rabboni! I have thee sought,
My master dear, full fast this day.

In reply Jesus urges her to pay attention to him, and emphasizes that he has died and is risen again :

Go away, Mary, and touch me not,
But take good keep what I shall say:
I am he that all things wrought,
Whom thou callest thy Lord and very God;
With bitter death I mankind bought,
And I am risen as thou may see.
And therefore, Mary, speak now with me,
And now let be your sorrowing.

In response to this prompting, Mary at first seems to understand what has happened, for she notices the wounds :

My Lord Jesu, I know thee now;
Thy wounds—how wet they are!

Yet this turns out to be another purely human response—namely, concern and compassion at the sight of his wounds. Once again she approaches Jesus, this time perhaps with the intention of binding up his wounds. Again Jesus must interrupt in order to bring her to a true awareness of his condition :

Nigh me not, my love, let be!
Mary, my daughter sweet;
To my Father in Trinity
Ascended have I not yet.

This command at last brings Mary to her senses :

Ah, mercy, comely conqueror,
Through thy might thou hast overcome death:
Mercy, Jesus, man and savior,
Thy love is sweeter than the mead.
Mercy, mighty Comforter,
For ere was I full wild of rede.
Welcome, Lord, all mine honor,
My joy, my love, in every stead.

Thus Mary confesses that Jesus has conquered death, addresses him as the Comforter (John 14: 16), and acknowledges that her earlier response to him was ill-advised (wild of rede). The progression from ignorance to knowledge in this play seems perfectly clear, is skillfully dramatized, and fits well the sense of the gospel passage as I have tried to define it.

Of course the interpretations of scripture found in the medieval drama were not without foundation in scriptural exegesis. Hence I would like to conclude this survey of tradition by quoting from Homily 86 (on John 20: 10-23) in St. John Chrysostom's commentary on the gospel of John.⁷ This is a justly famous collection of sermons, and is of considerable value historically because it was written scarcely three hundred years after John the Evangelist composed his gospel. Chrysostom begins with the verse that tells of Mary weeping at the sepulchre.

How tender-hearted and inclined to sympathy is womankind! I am mentioning this that you may not wonder why in the world it was that, while Mary was weeping bitterly at the tomb, Peter displayed no such emotion. "The disciples," the Evangelist stated, "went away to their home, while she remained standing there weeping." . . .

Yet the sight of the tomb was a great source of consolation. . . . Do you see how, the better to revive her courage, she leaned forward and tried to look at the spot where the body had lain? Therefore, she received no small reward for her great earnestness. For it was the woman who first saw what the disciples had not seen: namely angels sitting, one at the feet and the other at the head, in white, and with a manner radiating great brightness and joy. Since the woman was not sufficiently spiritual-minded to grasp the fact of the resurrection from the grave-clothes, further evidence was added and she beheld angels sitting in bright array, so as to afford her gradual relief from the suffering caused by the empty tomb, and to give her consolation.

However they said nothing to her of the Resurrection, but led her on only by degrees to this teaching. She beheld their shining faces—out of the ordinary in their brightness; she beheld their splendid appearance; she heard a sympathetic voice. What did it say? "Woman, why art thou weeping?" And by means of all these things, as if through a door gradually opening, little by little she was brought to an understanding of the Resurrection. Moreover,

St. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John The Apostle and Evangelist. Homilies 1-88.* 2 vols. New York, 1957-60. (The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation. vols. 33, 41).

the way they were seated led her to question them, for they certainly appeared to know what had taken place. For this reason they were not sitting together, but separated from one another. Since it was not likely that she would venture to begin the inquiry herself, they led her to start conversing with them by asking her a question and also by the way they were sitting.

What reply, then, did she make? She spoke warmly and tenderly: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." What are you saying? Do you not yet know about the Resurrection? Are you still thinking about the location of the body?

Do you perceive that she had not yet accepted this sublime doctrine? "When she had said this she turned around." But how was it logical for her to turn around, when she had just begun to talk with them and had not yet heard any information from them? It seems to me that as she said these words, Christ suddenly appeared behind her and startled the angels who, on beholding the Master, immediately showed by their attitude, by their gaze, and by their movements, that they were looking at the Lord. This awakened the curiosity of the woman and caused her to turn around.

He appeared to the angels, then, as He was [that is, in His glorified body], but did not show Himself to the woman in the same way, so as not to awe her from the start by the sight. On the contrary, He appeared to her under a humble and ordinary guise. And it is evident from her words that she even thought He was a gardener. However, it was not desirable to lead so lowly a person as this woman suddenly to lofty considerations, but rather, to do so gradually. Therefore He in His turn asked: "Woman, why art thou weeping? Whom dost thou seek?"

This implied that He knew what she desired to ask, and induced her to reply. Since the woman also was conscious of this, she did not yet mention the name of Jesus, but said, as if her inquirer knew about whom she was seeking information: "If thou hast removed him, tell me where thou hast laid him and I will take him away." Once again she was talking of placing and taking away and removing, as if the conversation concerned a corpse. That is, her words meant: "If you have taken Him away from there out of fear of the Jews, tell me and I will take possession of Him." What great good will and tenderness the woman showed! But her thoughts were not as yet fixed on the sublime. That is why He finally revealed His presence to her, not by the sight of Him, but by His voice.

But why is it that she now "turned" and spoke to Him, if He was actually already conversing with her. It seems to me that when she had said the words, "Where thou hast laid him," she turned back to the angels to ask them why they had seemed so amazed, and then, when Christ called her by name, she turned toward him again from them, and He revealed Himself by His voice. For, when He called her "Mary," then she recognized Him. Thus her recognition was brought about, not by the vision of Him, but by His voice.

Now, if some are inclined to ask: "How do you know that the angels were struck with astonishment and that it was for this reason the woman turned around?" they also inquire here: "How is it evident that she touched Him and fell at His feet?" However just as this is evident from the words, "Do not touch me," so also the other is implied in the fact that the Evangelist states that she turned around.

But why did He say: "Do not touch me"? Some maintain that she was asking for a spiritual favor, since she had heard Him speaking of it to His disciples: "If I go to the Father, I will ask him, and he will give you another Advocate" [John 14: 16].

Yet how could she have heard Him say this, when she was not in the company of His disciples? Besides, such an interpretation as this is far removed from the meaning of this passage. Moreover, how could she be making a request, when He had not yet gone to the Father? What does it mean then? It seems to me that she wished to enjoy His presence still, in the same way as before, and because of her joy at seeing Him, had no realization of His greatness, even though He had become much more excellent in bodily appearance. Thus, to lead her to abandon this notion and to refrain from addressing Him too familiarly (for He does not appear after this conversing so familiarly even with His disciples), He elevated her thoughts so that she would treat Him with a more reverential attitude.

Accordingly, if He had said: "Do not touch me as you did before, because things are not the same now, and I will not associate with you in future in the same way as before," it would seem somewhat harsh and boastful. But when He said: "I have not yet ascended to my Father," even though the words were without offense, they meant the same thing. By saying "I have not yet ascended" He meant that He was going to do so without delay; and that, because He was on the point of departing and of ceasing to be among men any longer, she ought not to regard Him in the same way as before.

With the eloquent exegesis of St. John Chrysostom, I rest my case for the traditional translation of John 20: 17. But I cannot resist one generalization from this instance. The twentieth century has already surpassed the renaissance in number and accuracy of English translations of the Bible, and this is indeed something to be proud of. Yet we are still lacking a translation which, for all its theological accuracy, gives full attention to the human significance of the text. If religion is to remain an important force in the humanizing of man, then modern translators must become more effective in representing the human spirit in its encounter with the divine. There is a danger that the scriptures may become wrapped in a winding sheet of theological abstractions. To produce another version in the language of today is not enough; our poets must become translators of the Bible.

Having strayed this far from the main topic, let me conclude by recapitulating the central point. Until modern times, the command of Jesus, *mē mou haptou*, has traditionally been rendered "touch me not." But twentieth-century translators, almost without exception, have interpreted it to mean, "do not hold me" or "do not cling to me." This modern consensus seems based in part on theological considerations, and in part on the need to harmonize the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene with his subsequent appearance to Thomas. In my opinion, however, the modern interpretation is not in keeping with what has been called the "psychological subtlety" of the Magdalene episode. Therefore the traditional translation "touch me not" is to be preferred and should be restored, for it allows us to read the command of Jesus as a gentle warning to Mary, a sign that their relationship can no longer be the same, since she is still in the world, and he has now crossed over into the life beyond.