Landas 24:2 (2010) 145–169

"DO NOT HOLD ON TO ME"

John 20:17 Revisited

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> Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17, RSV).

John 20:17 is one of the most difficult and certainly among the most disputed verses in the New Testament.[1] Raymond E. Brown lists the strange solutions of some authors to the question why Jesus forbids Mary to touch him, namely: Jesus' wounds are still sore; or Mary Magdalene will be defiled if she touches a dead body; or the risen Jesus is so holy a high priest that Mary should not sully him with ordinary contact.[2] In order to avoid the difficulty of explaining this verse, some authors try to amend its syntax or to read it in an unusual way. Reimund Bieringer gives us some striking examples of attempts to solve the difficulty either by putting a full stop after the

[1]Reimund Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to My God and to Your God' (John 20:17): Resurrection and Ascension in the Gospel of John," in C.R. Koester & R. Bieringer, eds., *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 233.

[2]Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, xiii–xxi (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 992–993.

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prohibition "Do not hold me," or by considering "for I have not yet ascended to the Father" as a question.[3] Fortunately, it seems to this author that, with the recent research project of the Leuven group,[4] a certain agreement is now being made about the meaning of this thorny verse. This article hopes to contribute something to the understanding of 20:17, a significant verse in the Fourth Gospel.

The Greek text of John 20:17 is as follows:

20:17a λέγει αὐτῇ Ἰησοῦς,

20:17b Μή μου ἅπτου,

20:17c οὔπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα·

20:17d πορεύου δὲ πρὸς τοὺς ἀδελφούς μου

20:17e καὶ εἰπὲ αὐτοῖς,

20:17f Ἀναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου

καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ θεόν μου καὶ θεὸν ὑμῶν.

The Immediate Literary Context of 20:17

Mary Magdalene appears for the first time in John 19:25, together with other women standing by the cross: Jesus' mother, his mother's sister and Mary the wife of Clopas. Her name suggests that she is Maria from Magdala, a town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. In the gospel of Luke, Mary Magdalene belongs to the group of women who, after being healed of evil spirits and infirmities by Jesus, followed him and helped him and his group in their needs (Lk. 8:2–3). These

[3]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 209–217.

[4]Barbara Baert, Reimund Bieringer, Karlijn Demasure & Sabin Van Den Eynde, *Noli me tangere: Mary Magdalene: One Person, Many Images* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2006), 23.

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women, who "had followed him from Galilee," witnessed his death and his burial (Lk. 23:49, 55).

Mary Magdalene appears in the gospel of John for the second time in John 20:1–18. She was the first one who came to visit the tomb in the early morning of the first day of the week (Jn 20:1). Without seeing the body of Jesus, she, in panic, ran back to alert Peter and the other disciple (20:2). Mary apparently returned to the tomb with them. When they were to go back home (20:10), she was still unwilling to leave (20:11). She stayed behind and was the first one who had the privilege to meet the risen Jesus (20:16), and to receive the mandate to proclaim the good news to his *adelphoi* (20:18).

In all four gospels, Mary Magdalene was an eye-witness to Jesus' death (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; Luke 23:49; John 19:25), and was one of those who went first to the tomb (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10; John 20:1). In the Synoptics, it was a group of women who went to the tomb on the first day of the week, and Mary Magdalene was always mentioned first on the list (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). In John, the figure of Mary Magdalene became all the more prominent. It seems that she was the only woman who went to the tomb (John 20:1), and the only one who saw the risen Jesus (John 20:18). Yet this is part of the literary style and characterization of John, the evangelist, because when Mary Magdalene reported the incident to Peter and the other disciple, she said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and *we* do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:2).

When Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb, and surmised that the body of Jesus was not inside, her only preoccupation was to know where it was in order to retrieve it. Three times she showed her anxiety about this loss, expressed in almost the same words—to Peter she said: "They have taken (ἦραν) the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know (οἴδαμεν) where they have laid (ἔθηκαν) him" (20:2); then to the two angels sitting in the tomb, she told them the reason for her weeping: "Because they have taken away (ἦραν) my Lord, and I do not know (οἶδα) where they have laid (ἔθηκαν) him" (20:13); finally to the risen Jesus himself, who asked her: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" (20:15), she

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answered, "Sir, if you have carried him away (ἐβάστασας), tell me where you have laid (ἔθηκας) him, and I will take him away (ἀρω)" (20:15). It seems that her personal concern and involvement became stronger after every answer: from the "we" and "the Lord" in 20:2 to the more personal "I" and "my Lord" in 20:13; from the passive resignation in 20:2, 13 to the active and personal engagement in 20:15 that showed a strong desire to take the dead body back. However, in the language of Mary, what she was seeking is not just a dead "body of Jesus" (19:40). It was "the Lord" who was taken away and laid somewhere else[5] (20:2. 13). Mary's efforts to seek her Lord in tears and anxiety were a sign of her affectionate relationship with her teacher.[6] She was shocked at his terrible and ignominious death, and then further shocked at losing his dead body. When she recognizes the voice of the Lord Jesus calling her name (cf. 10:3, 16), in a flash she knows that this is not the gardener as she thought. She was seeking for the dead body of her teacher, and what she found was her *Rabboni* alive. This brings her the sudden joy beyond telling in her heart (cf. 16:20, 22).

Although it is not said explicitly that Mary has touched or held Jesus, F. F. Bruce suggests that "[t]he most natural interpretation is that Mary, in her delight at finding her Lord alive, clutches him lest she should lose him again."[7] Craig S. Keener also thinks that: "it is

[5]For Mary Magdalene, Jesus is the Lord, her Lord, who was lost and whom she is trying to find (20:2, 13). The Lord is also the prominent title of the risen Jesus Christ in Johannine Easter narrative (20:18, 20, 25, 28; 21:7, 12, 15, 16, 17, 21). Here this title is theologically and narratologically exact.

[6]Some commentators liken Mary's persistent seeking to the woman's seeking of her lover in the Song of Songs (3:1–4). See Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 194, note 368.

[7]F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 389. Note that some manuscripts (א[1] Θ Ψ (*f*[13]) *pc* vg[mss] sy[(s).h]) put this verse right before 20:17, "και προσεδραμεν αψασθαι αυτου" (she ran to him to hold him). This explains Jesus' prohibition in 20:17a.

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difficult to envision Mary, under such circumstances, merely poking a suspicious finger at Jesus' arm or grabbing his right hand for an ancient promise of fidelity."[8] Moreover, the Gospel of Matthew kept a stronger witness of the women who "took hold of his feet and worshipped him" when the risen Jesus met them (28:9).

The Meaning of μή μου ἅπτου (John 20:17b) in its Literary Context

The verb ἅπτομαι here is a *hapax legomenon* in John. There are two questions to be discussed in 20:17b: the meaning of the verb ἅπτομαι, and the meaning of the negated present imperative of this verb.

Some understand that ἅπτομαι means to touch.[9] Sandra M. Schneiders denies the meaning of holding or clinging of this verb, arguing that John knows the verb κρατέω (to hold on to) and he uses it in 20:23.[10] Reimund Bieringer remarks that "[t]he 37 NT occurrences of ἅπτομαι are mainly in the Synoptic gospels and express touching by or of Jesus."[11] Many other translators and commentators, however, understand ἅπτομαι in the sense of to hold or to cling to.[12]

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[8]Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 2003), 1193.

[9]Among them, J.H. Bernard, *Gospel according to John*, Vol. II, ed. A. H. McNeile (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1963), 669; Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel*, 196.

[10]Sandra M. Schneiders, "Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin in John 20," in Craig R. Koester & Reimund Bieringer, eds., *The Resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 171.

[11]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 229.

[12]The translation of RSV is "Do not hold me." The NRSV: "Do not hold on to me." Urban C. von Wahlde in *The Gospel and Letters of John*, Vol. 2, Commentary on the Gospel of John (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U. K.: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010): "Do not hold me." Francis J. Moloney

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In fact, the verb ἅπτομαι (middle voice) may cover various meanings: to fasten oneself to, cling to, hang on by, lay hold of, grasp, touch.[13] In 7:39, Luke uses ἅπτομαι to describe all the acts of the sinful woman: wiping Jesus' feet with her hair and anointing them with the ointment. Thus, semantically speaking, this verb may signify to touch, to hold or to cling to.

Some authors understand the negated present imperative in 20:17b as a command not to continue an action that has already begun.[14] Max Zerwick affirms that μή with present imperative forbids the continuation of an action. Thus μή μου ἅπτου means stop clinging to me.[15] Reimund Bieringer agrees that it is the normal interpretation in the handbooks of Greek language.[16] But he argues that in John, "[a]mong the 16 occurrences of the present imperative, there is only one that clearly forbids an action that has already begun, namely John 2:16: 'Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!'"[17] Bieringer concludes,

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in *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 524: "Do not cling to me." Ben Witherington III in *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on The Fourth Gospel* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 329: "Do not hold on to me." Rudolf Schnackenburg in *The Gospel according to John,* Vol. 3, trans. David Smith & G. A. Kon (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 314: "Do not hold me." Brown in *The Gospel according to John,* 980: "Don't cling to me."

[13]See H.G. Liddell & Robert Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 112.

[14]The New American Bible: "Stop holding on to me." George R. Beasley-Murray in *John* (Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1999), 365: "Do not keep on trying to hold me."

[15]Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, rev. ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 345. See more: Max Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1963), 246–247.

[16]F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 172–173.

[17]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 230.

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"Neither the semantics of the verb nor the *Aktionsart* of the verb form necessitate this. The fact is that in the immediately preceding context nothing suggests that Mary Magdalene actually touches Jesus. We only hear that she turns and says 'Rabbouni.'"[18]

It is true that in the immediate context of John 20:16–17, as Bieringer remarks, there is nothing that suggests Mary's touching or clinging to Jesus,[19] but in the larger context of John chapters 19 and 20, such an act is more likely.

The Relationship Between 20:17b and 20:17c

20:17b μή μου ἅπτου,

20:17c οὔπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα

As has been noted above, 20:17b is more likely to be understood as Jesus' command to Mary to stop holding to him, although this does not exclude the possibility that Mary just tries to touch or to hold the risen Lord. In any event, the reason that Jesus gives to justify his prohibition in 20:17b is apparently found in 20:17c: "*for* (γὰρ) I have not yet ascended to the Father." But it is hard to understand the causal connection between them. That is why some commentators try to solve the problem. Michael McGehee considers the γὰρ as an anticipatory γὰρ, and he puts a full stop after 20:17b. Eventually there is no causal relationship between 20:17b and c.[20] Sandra M. Schneiders, on her

[18]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 230. He also notes that in John 10:37, it is impossible to understand μὴ πιστεύετέ μοι as forbidding an action that has already begun. Thus the present imperative with μη in a prohibition sometimes signifies the breaking off of the attempt to perform an action.

[19]Moloney reminds that "to cling" is used to indicate the ongoing holding of someone and does not have any pejorative significance (*The Gospel of John*, 528, note 17).

[20]Michael McGehee, "A Less Theological Reading of John 20:17," *JBL* 105 (1986), 299–302.

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part, reads 20:17c not as an affirmation but "as a rhetorical question expecting a negative reply, that is, 'Am I as yet (or still) not ascended?' The proper answer to the question is, 'No, you are indeed ascended, that is, glorified.'"[21] Thus for her, the reason for Jesus' prohibition is precisely his ascension and glorification that already happened. The Jesus who appears to Mary is the glorified Jesus, and so the old way of relationship has come to an end. Reimund Bieringer makes some comments about McGehee and Schneiders' positions by saying that not only do their readings not accord with the immediate context of 20:17 but also their understanding of some words is grammatically debatable.[22]

"Do not hold me (17b), for I have not yet ascended to the Father (17c)." Why was Mary forbidden to hold or to cling to him when he has not yet ascended to the Father? Does it imply that Mary is permitted to hold Jesus *after* his ascent to his Father? Why is it that in Matthew 28:9–10, Jesus said nothing when the women "came up and took hold of his feet (ἐκράτησαν αὐτοῦ τοὺς πόδας) and worshipped him?"

In the light of what has been discussed, we hope to find answers to these questions. Naturally, there is nothing wrong if Mary holds on to her beloved Rabbouni who was dead and then found alive. Her holding is the acceptable sign of her deep affection and unexpected joy. Jesus then forbids her for another reason. Together with most commentators, Moloney posits that "Jesus' words, *me mou haptou*, instruct her that she must desist from her attempt to reestablish the relationship she once had with him."[23] For Brown, "when Magdalene sees Jesus, she thinks that he has returned as he promised [as in 14:18–19; 16:22] and now he will stay with her and his followers, resuming former relationships."[24]

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[21]Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written that You may Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1999), 198.

[22]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 213, 216.

[23]Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, 526.

[24]Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 1012.

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According to him, Jesus wants to correct Mary's mistaken idea about their relationship and thus gives a prohibition: "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."[25]

For this author, the real reason is focused in Jesus' words in 20:17c (γὰρ). First, in the process of ascending to the Father after his death, the appearances of the risen Jesus belong to a temporary phase[26] which has specific purposes as we have seen above. They are important for the disciples rather than for the risen Jesus. The phase of appearances stands between the ongoing ascent of the risen Jesus and his complete ascent to the Father still to come. This phase is "only provisional and transitional"[27] because it does not last forever, and once the purposes are achieved, its existence is no longer needed. As has been noted, on the one hand, appearances prove that Jesus is already risen and he is on the way to his Father (20:17f); on the other, they show that the process of ascending is not yet finished (20:17c) by the fact that he still appears to the disciples. Therefore, a certain holding to Jesus is acceptable, but too much affectionate holding or clinging to the risen Jesus may be inappropriate. Not that if Mary holds on to the risen Jesus, he cannot ascend to the Father, but because it is not fitting if Mary continues to cling to a phase of provisional and transitional appearances of Jesus, and forgets that Jesus still has a destination to reach: to be forever with his Father in intimacy and glory.[28]

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[25]Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 1012.

[26]Xavier Léon-Dufour wrote: "*la montée auprès du Père marquerait la fin du bref délai pendant lequel ont eu lieu les apparitions pascales. Jésus dirait à Marie que, s'il est encore sensiblement près d'elle, ce n'est que transitoire*" (*Lecture de L'Evangile selon Jean*, Tome IV [Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996], 222–223).

[27]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 210.

[28]This is the position of Michael Theobald, "Der johanneische Osterglaube und die Grenzen seiner narrative Vermittlung (Joh 20)," in Rudolf Hoppe &

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Second, while clinging to Jesus, Mary may also forget that her union with her Lord from now on will be much deeper than before as Jesus said in the Farewell discourse: "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (14:20). Her affectionate love for Jesus must not be expressed by the holding on to the resurrected body and stopping there, but as Jesus said: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (14:23). All of this will come true when the Paraclete, the spirit of truth, will be sent by the Father in Jesus' name (14:26).

Now we can return to the question: when Jesus has ascended to his Father is it permitted for Mary to cling to Jesus? For James McPolin, "'clinging' expresses the notion of intimate attachment to or communion with Jesus and he assures her that she will receive this gift of intimate communion when he has 'ascended' to his Father …."[29] Thus Jesus forbids Mary to attach too much to him because he is trying to focus her on a deeper and more intimate union with him that is offered from now on. His prohibition also provides him an occasion to reveal more about his present state, and that is a much more important message.[30]

Third, in this moment of deep psychological involvement, Jesus not only gives a prohibition but also a command: "but go to my brothers and say to them …" (20:17de). The task given is another reason for Mary not to stay too long with Jesus. Her main message of Easter to the disciples is simple: "'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said

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Ulrich Busse, eds., *Von Jesus zum Christus: Christologische Studien: Festgabefür Paul Hoffmann zum 65. Geburtstag* (BZNW 93; Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998), 111–112, quoted in Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 211: "Do not hold on to me, for (as the one who is standing before you now, namely as *the one who is raised from the tomb*) I have not yet ascended to the Father; (my mode of existence as *risen one* is not yet my actual mode of existence with the Father, but it is only provisional)."

[29]James McPolin, *John* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1979), 215.

[30]Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel*, 196.

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these things to her" (20:18). This is a witness to what she saw and heard. She announces to the male disciples that she has concretely experienced the presence of the Risen Jesus, both physically and spiritually.

Another question often posed is why Thomas was invited to touch Jesus while Mary was prohibited. One may note that the verbs are not the same in the two pericopes (v. 17: *haptomai*; v. 27ab: *pherein*; v. 27c: *ballein*), and the contexts are different.[31] In this author's opinion, it is not because Jesus has already ascended to his Father when he "came" to meet Thomas that Thomas was invited to touch him.[32] In fact, there are some differences in these two cases. At the moment of hearing her name being called, Mary immediately recognizes her Rabboni standing by her, not the gardener (20:16). Her act of holding Jesus comes from her joy and affection for Jesus the Lord. Implicitly, she believed that he is risen. Jesus' prohibition prevents her from the excessive attachment to his temporary mode of appearance, and reminds her of his coming destination in the world of the Father. Thomas, on the contrary, has not yet believed in the witness of Mary and his co-disciples. He said "unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (20:25). All of this is the condition *sine qua non* of his faith in the resurrection of his Master. The risen Jesus wants to satisfy Thomas' excessive demands because he does not want to lose him (17:12). That is why he came to him and permitted him to do what he wanted to.[33] The purpose of Jesus' condescension is to help Thomas to move from ἄπιστος to πιστός (20:27). The evangelist did not tell us whether Thomas did what he had demanded or not.

[31]See Witherington, *John's Wisdom*, 332.

[32]W. Marxen, *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. M. Hohl (London: SCM Press, 1970), 60–61.

[33]Bernard contends that "[t]he only *explicit* statement in the Gospels of the Risen Christ being touched is Mt. 28:9. Nevertheless Lk. 24:39 and Jn. 20:27 sufficiently indicate that, in the judgment of the evangelists, it was possible to touch Him, and that He invited such experience to be made" (*Gospel according to John*, 669).

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Yet Jesus achieved his goal with the confession of Thomas: "My Lord and my God" (20:28). Thus there is no inconsistency between Jesus' prohibition against the holding of Mary and his invitation to Thomas to have contact with his body.[34]

In conclusion, the prohibition of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel goes very well with John's Christology. It gives the evangelist an opportunity to develop his message of Easter. The scene of holding Jesus' feet in Matthew 28:9 is only an act of affection and worship on the part of the women, but in John 20:17, Jesus' prohibition of holding on to him leads to the revelation about his ongoing journey to the Father.

In the Fourth Gospel's resurrection narrative, one thing we should note is that the evangelist pays much more attention to "seeing" the risen Jesus than to "touching" him. The verb "to see" (ὁράω) is used seven times in 20:18–29. This same verb was already used in 16:16, 17, 19, 22 to describe the future encounter between the risen Jesus and his disciples. The witnesses of the resurrection essentially focus on seeing: "I have seen the Lord" (20:18); "we have seen the Lord" (20:25). Thomas has asked to see the print of the nails in Jesus' hands (20:25), and the risen Jesus, in turn, told him: "see my hands" (20:27). After the confession of Thomas, Jesus did not say anything about touching, but he insisted on the relationship between seeing (or not-seeing) and faith: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (20:29).

The Relationship Between 20:17c and 20:17f

20:17c οὔπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα

20:17f ᾽αναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου καὶ πατέρα ὑμῶν καὶ θεόν μου καὶ θεὸν ὑμῶν.

[34]See R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 243.

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How does one reconcile "I have not yet ascended to the Father" (20:17c) with "I am ascending to my Father …" (20:17f)? It is possible to understand 20:17c from the whole theological framework of Johannine Christology.

From God the Father, the Logos "came into the world" (1:9), "came to his own home" (1:11), and became flesh in Jesus Christ (1:14). The whole journey of Jesus the incarnate Son on earth is summed up in this saying: "I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father" (16:28), or more briefly, "he had come from God and was going to God" (13:3). God the Father is his point of departure and his destination. The Fourth Gospel is the story of this journey, and John uses his literary genius to tell it.

The Fourth Gospel has no narrative of "ascension" like the ones in Luke 24:50–51 and Acts 1:9–11, although the notion of ascension does exist in John. John uses many times the expression "I go to the Father" to express Jesus' return to the One who sent him (ὑπάγω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα: 16:10, 17; πορεύομαι πρὸς τὸν πατέρα: 14:12, 28; 16:28). John also uses similar expressions: πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει: 13:3, and ὑπάγω πρὸς τὸν πέμψαντά με: 7:33. Moreover, John uses the verb "to ascend or to go up" in regard to the Son of man in 3:13, ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, and 6:62, ἀναβαίνοντα ὅπου ἦν τὸ πρότερον. If there is something totally new in 20:17c, it is not the proposition ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, but the adverb of time οὔπω. This unexpected adverb suggests a chronological process.

Bieringer is right when he posits that "in 20:17c John is speaking about a process of ascension that is not yet completed."[35] That is a reason why the verb ἀναβαίνω is used here instead of πορεύομαι or

[35]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 224. Ibid., 216, he wrote: "In John 20:17c the semantics of the verb ἀναβαίνω imply an action that takes time. The durative *Aktionsart* together with the perfect tense suggests that Jesus is saying in this verse: 'I have not yet completed the process of ascending to the Father.' This would be in keeping with the use of the present tense ἀναβαίνω in 20:17f, which could be paraphrased: 'I am in the process

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ὑπάγω as John did earlier in the gospel. Thus when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, the process of ascending to the Father is happening or has begun already: the present tense is used in 20:17f ’αναβαίνω πρὸς τὸν πατέρα μου.[36] But that process is not yet finished: the perfect tense is used in 20:17c οὔπω γὰρ ἀναβέβηκα πρὸς τὸν πατέρα. Jesus began his ascent to his Father when he was raised from the dead. Between his resurrection and his "complete" exaltation or glorification were his appearances to his own disciples. Because the Easter appearances play an important role in the tradition of the early Church, the evangelist of the Fourth Gospel had to adjust his christological framework by using the notion of process in 20:17. Andrew T. Lincoln perceptively observes the evangelist's attempt in this remark:

> The mention of Jesus' ascent to the Father reflects the Johannine understanding of Jesus' hour of crucifixion and glorification as his return to his Father. For the evangelist, Jesus' death, resurrection, ascent, and glorification can all be grasped as one event. Jesus' words about his ascent are part of the evangelist's attempt to bring this perspective to expression within the constraints of the traditional resurrection accounts.[37]

The risen Jesus tells Mary that he has not yet (οὔπω) ascended to the Father (20:17c), but he begins to ascend to Him already (20:17f). The question is when Jesus' full ascension occurs. Bieringer summarizes different opinions suggested by commentators about the "chronological"

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of ascending.' In this interpretation 20:17c does not contradict the Johannine interpretation of the cross as exaltation and glorification."

[36]Cf. Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 166, about the durative (linear or progressive) in the present stem.

[37]Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 493. In the same vein, for Brown (*The Gospel according to John,* 1014), John 20:17c and f is the evangelist's technique of dramatization to achieve this goal in a narrative that is necessarily sequential: Jesus is lifted up on the cross; he is raised up from the dead; and he goes up to the Father—all as part of one action and one "hour."

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sequence of resurrection and ascension as follows: all happened in Jesus' exaltation on the cross (Sandra Schneiders); the ascension occurred between the appearance to Mary Magdalene and the appearance to the disciples without and with Thomas (Hartwig Thyen); the ascension happened after the appearance to the disciples with Thomas (Gert Hartmann).[38] It is, however, possible to suggest an alternative reading that as long as the risen Jesus still appeared to his disciples on earth (and the appearance to Thomas was not the last one!), Jesus has not yet ascended to his Father. Jesus' complete ascension to his Father happens when he no longer appears to his disciples. This suggestion agrees with the conception of the Synoptics, or at least of Luke. Jesus' ascension is the full stop of his post-resurrection appearances to the apostles (Acts 1:1–11; Luke 24:50–53). In the mentality of the Jews, it is impossible to believe that Jesus is risen if his body is still in the tomb. In the same vein, it is also very hard for the disciples to believe that Jesus has ascended already to his Father when he still appears to them. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* posits that the "mysterious words" of the Risen One in John 20:17 "indicate a difference in manifestation between the glory of the risen Christ and that of the Christ exalted to the Father's right hand, a transition marked by the historical and transcendent event of Ascension."[39] No doubt at the moment of his Resurrection, Christ's body was glorified, but when he manifested himself to his disciples during forty days, "his glory remains veiled under the appearance of ordinary humanity. Jesus' final apparition ends with the irreversible entry of his humanity into divine glory … where he is seated from that time forward at God's hand."[40]

Urban C. von Wahlde sums up very well two ways of thinking in John: "In one important sense, his ascension was complete when

[38]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 233.

[39]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 660.

[40]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 659.

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he rose from the dead although, from another perspective, it was not complete until after his appearances to the disciples."[41]

The Newness of 20:17def

"Jesus says he is still on the move, and he also sets Mary in motion to bear the news to the disciples"[42] whom he calls now his brethren (20:17d). In the Farewell discourse, Jesus has opened a new kind of relationship with his disciples when he said, "No longer do I call you servants … but I have called you friends" (15:15). Only after his resurrection is the risen Jesus represented as speaking of His disciples as "my brethren" (20:17d; cf. Mt. 28:10; Heb. 2:11,12). Margaret M. Beirne argues: "that ἀδελφοί μου is inclusive of women and of men disciples beyond the Twelve, is clear from the fact [that] the new family of disciples is founded on the mother of Jesus and the beloved disciple (cf. 19:26b–27a)."[43] With the resurrection of Jesus and the beginning of his ascent to the Father, the disciples' relationship to him becomes more intimate now, and as a result, they have a new and special relationship to God, Jesus' Father. The disciples are introduced into the intimate world of the Father and the Son, the world of love as Jesus has promised in the Farewell discourse (14:20–23). "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (20:17f): this verse is the proclamation of the victory of Jesus who successfully finished his work entrusted by his Father (19:30). It is also the good news for the disciples: to share the divine sonship of Jesus.[44] Xavier Léon-Dufour argues that the evangelist does not intend to emphasize the difference

[41]von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 841.

[42]Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (Downers Grove, Illinois/Leicester, England: 1999), 476.

[43]Margaret M. Beirne, *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 215.

[44]John 20:17f may be a reminiscence of Jeremiah 31:33 and Ruth 1:16.

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of "my God" and "your God" in 20:17f. Here John does not want to distinguish the sonship of Jesus by nature and the believers' sonship by adoption (although that distinction exists). For him, "*le* 'kai' *a ici une valeur conjonctive et non disjonctive*."[45] Sandra M. Schneiders calls this "the Easter kerygma" in which "the work of the Word made flesh is complete (by his glorification), and its fruits are available to his disciples."[46] "Jesus eternally is the Son of God; he gives to those who believe in him the power to become the children of God (1:11)."[47]

Bieringer reads John 20:17 in a theocentric perspective. He explains Jesus' prohibition of holding, and the expression "my Father and your Father, my God and your God" as an act of the evangelist "to shift the focus away from the risen Christ to God."[48] Even the risen Christ is not someone to be worshiped. For him, "[t]he Johannine Jesus deflects the attention away from himself in two directions, to the Father and to the 'brothers'."[49] Chapters 20 and 21 of John are, however, very christocentric. The risen Jesus is the center of all resurrection narratives. To see the risen Lord is crucial for the disciples (20:18, 20, 25, 27, 29), and Jesus' divine identity culminates in the confession of Thomas: My Lord and my God. However important the role of the risen Jesus is, he never eclipses God who "has sent him" (20:21). God is the destination of Jesus' ascent, and the One whom he calls lovingly "my Father, my God" (20:17). The conclusion of the Gospel focuses

[45]Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de L'Evangile selon Jean*, 225–226, note 79. In the same vein, Ernst Haenchen, in *Das Johannes Evangelium: Ein Kommentar* (Tübingen: J. C. Mohr, 1980), wrote: "*Damit verfehlt man gerade die Absicht des Evangelisten. Er will in Wirklichkeit sagen, dass nun Jesu Gott auch der Gott der Jünger, Jesu Vater auch derjenige der Jünger sei*" (571).

[46]Schneiders, *Written that You may Believe*, 199.

[47]C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), 471.

[48]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 232.

[49]Bieringer, "'I am ascending to my Father and your Father …'," 234.

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on the faith in Jesus the Christ who is the Son of God (20:31). In fact, the evangelist needs not refocus on God in 20:17 because in his whole Gospel, there has never been a conflict between Father and Son. John 20:17 is so christocentric that it leads to God, and it is so theocentric that it glorifies Jesus.

Who is the Jesus whom Mary Magdalene Encountered?

Bieringer states, "Even in the scene where she recognizes Jesus, it remains unclear whether Mary Magdalene understands that Jesus is risen from the dead. Only when she announces to the disciples that she has seen the Lord (20:18; cf. 20:25) does the reader who is familiar with the language of the New Testament recognize a complete faith in the resurrection."[50] Michael Mullins suggests: "The fact that she wanted to cling on to Jesus emphasizes that she saw him as the very same person, Jesus of Nazareth, and not as a wraith or ghostly apparition of a kind familiar to a Greco-Roman from reading the Homeric literature, or to a modern reader familiar with Shakespeare's ghost of Hamlet's father."[51] In the same vein, Ignace de la Potterie also posits that when Mary recognizes Jesus and cries out *Rabbouni*, "it is not yet a matter of authentic Easter faith …. It is the Teacher who has returned *as he was before* …. Obviously 'the Jesus whom Mary sees is the Jesus of the past, Jesus before his death.'"[52] Similarly, Raymond F. Collins contends that even at the moment Mary recognizes Jesus when he calls her by name,

[50]Reimund Bieringer, "*Noli me tangere* and the New Testament: An Exegetical Approach," in Barbara Baert, Reimund Bieringer, Karlijn Demasure & Sabin Van Den Eynde, *Noli me tangere: Mary Magdalene: One Person, Many Images* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 2006), 23.

[51]Michael Mullins, *The Gospel of John* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2003), 406.

[52]Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus: The Passion and the Resurrection of Jesus according to John: Text and Spirit,* trans. Dom Gregory Murray (England: St Paul Publication, 1989), 213.

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"her faith is inadequate for she believes that Jesus' resurrection is a matter of his resuscitation, of his being restored to his former state of life."[53] Her form of address "Rabbouni" reflects her level of faith. For Brown, "when Magdalene sees Jesus, she thinks that he has returned as he promised [as in 14:18–19; 16:22] and now he will stay with her and his followers, resuming former relationships."[54] As a result, for the above commentators, Mary thinks that the Jesus who appears to her is not the risen Jesus, but the earthly Jesus whom she knew before the passion.

Some other commentators have a different view. For them, when Jesus calls Mary by her name she recognizes him as the risen one. Rudolf Schnackenburg notes: "The risen one is no other than the earthly Jesus; he now encounters Mary in a new way. She turns to him—an outward gesture, which at the same time expresses an opening up of her inner self and a believing openness to the risen Lord."[55] Xavier Léon-Dufour expresses the same opinion: "*En s'exclamant 'Rabbouni', Marie exprime spontanément l'émotion de la présence retrouvée, mais aussi subitement sa foi.*"[56] D. A. Carson also affirms: "Whatever the cause of her blindness, the single word *Mary*, spoken as Jesus had always uttered it, was enough to remove it."[57] Mary's recognition of the voice of the risen Jesus is often linked with John 10:3–4 in which the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and they know his voice.

The opinion of Schnackenburg, Léon-Dufour and Carson is more plausible. First, Mary failed to recognize him immediately from the outset, simply because he had not appeared as the same earthly Jesus, as the one whom she knew before. There was a real transformation

[53]Raymond F. Collins, *These Things have been Written: Studies on the Fourth Gospel* (Louvain: Peeters Press/Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 34.

[54]Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 1012.

[55]Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to John*, 317.

[56]Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de L'Evangile selon Jean*, 221.

[57]D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1996), 641.

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in Jesus. Therefore, when afterwards she recognized him by his call, it is the transformed Jesus whom she recognized.

Second, in all the Easter narratives in the gospels, it is Jesus who appeared to reveal himself to his disciples as the resurrected one. They moved from non-recognition to recognition, or stayed in their unbelief. There is no "transition" between the two phases. For example, the two disciples of Emmaus thought Jesus was a visitor to Jerusalem (Lk. 24:18), but when Jesus broke the bread, they recognized him immediately (Lk 24:31). Thomas moved from ἄπιστος to πιστός as soon as Jesus generously satisfied his demands (Jn 20:27–28). When Jesus stood on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, the disciples did not know that it was Jesus (Jn. 21:4), but after the big catch of fish, the beloved disciple recognized him at once, saying: "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7). Mary is not an exception. She need not hear Jesus preaching about his ascent to his Father in order to recognize him as the Resurrected. There is no sign in 20:17 that shows her progress of faith in the earthly Jesus to the risen one. In 20:18, Mary proclaims: "I have seen the Lord." The Lord, who is risen, is her Rabbouni.

Third, when Mary recognizes Jesus as her Rabbouni, she cannot forget that she was the eye-witness of his death on the cross some days ago, and she is looking for his body until now. If he appears now to her as a living person, he must be resurrected. Mary calls the risen Jesus *Rabbouni*, and she clings to him as her risen Lord, not simply as her Teacher before. Mary begins to recognize the risen Jesus as soon as she heard his voice calling her, not as "Woman" (20:15) but by her personal name "Mary." She had looked for the body of Jesus (τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ: 20:12), but what she found was his resurrected body. There was a complete change in this body,[58] but it was not another body of Jesus. When Mary touches or holds it, we do not know whether she recognizes the difference, because "his body was not the same physical

[58]Saint Paul tries to explain this mystery in 1 Cor. 15:42–45. He wrote: "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body (σῶμα ψυχικόν), there is also a spiritual body (σῶμα πνευματικόν)" (1 Cor. 15:44).

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body he had before the Resurrection."[59] One thing is certain: she has had a unique experience of encountering the risen Christ. No doubt, this initial recognition of the risen Jesus would be deepened by the following encounter and conversation with him as summarized in 20:17.

Hence, on the one hand, "there is a real continuity between the earthly and the risen Jesus"[60] as the resurrection narratives intentionally point out: he appears to Mary and she recognizes him as her Rabbouni. On the other hand, there is a complete transformation in his whole person, even in his body: he was not recognized by Mary at first sight. He came into the room when the doors were shut. It is probable that the Jesus whom Mary thinks she has encountered is the earthly Jesus who has died and now is risen. But the risen Jesus is not a corpse revivified as the resuscitated Lazarus. "Jesus is no longer in the flesh (i.e., he is no longer mortal). He is no longer subject to the conditions of time, space, causality."[61]

Conclusion

John 20:17 reveals itself as a verse succinct and rich in content. This verse is theologically and christologically important in the Fourth Gospel because it presents, for the first time, the connection between the resurrection and the ascension, not as identical entities, but as distinct aspects of the same mystery in process. In this verse, one can find the close ties between the risen Jesus with his disciples whom he calls brothers and sisters, and the intimate community between God, Jesus and his disciples. "'This is the first use of 'brothers and sisters' (*adelphous*, ἀδελφούς) to refer to Jesus' disciples, and the first and only

[59]von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 847.

[60]Pheme Perkins, *The Gospel according to St. John: A Theological Commentary* (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978), 234.

[61]Schneiders, "Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin in John 20," 174.

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reference to God as 'your Father' in a positive way (contrast 8:41, 41, 44)."[62] Being ἀδελφοι of Jesus (cf. 21:23) is the foundation for the fraternity and sorority among Christians in the community.

John 20:17 gives Mary Magdalene an active role as an *apostola apostolorum*. The risen Jesus "*authorizes* her to bring *a specific message* of great importance to *specific people*: 'Go to my brethren and say to them ….'"[63] Mary is the first one who was told carefully by the risen Jesus what to proclaim: the good news of his ongoing ascent to the Father combined with the good news of the divine sonship of the believers. In our world today, we need a Mary Magdalene who goes to Jesus' disciples and witnesses "I have seen the Lord."

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[62]Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 96.

[63]Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), 320.

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