

Mary and Jesus in the Garden: Ban and Blessing

Abstract

In this essay I describe two contrasting strands of interpretation in text, art and music in order to ask how the encounter between Mary and Jesus in the garden generates and sustains both readings of ban (in the command “Do Not Touch Me”) and blessing (in a meeting between a woman and the beloved she sought beyond death).

Introduction

Jesus' resurrection is central to Christian faith. In the gospels and in Christian art of the east and west, the resurrection is first proclaimed not seen. And at the heart of the resurrection is the witness of women disciples: to the empty tomb and then to an encounter with Jesus. So when Christian art begins later to depict these events in the 5th century CE, we see renditions of the empty tomb and women disciples meeting angels and Jesus. Mary Magdalene, with other women or alone, is in all gospel accounts of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances of Jesus. Still later, the encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden becomes stylized on the basis of Jesus' words to Mary in the garden: “[Noli Me Tangere](#)” from the Latin translation of the words Jesus spoke to Mary. In the scene, Mary reaches towards a resurrected Jesus while he extends a hand towards her speaking words that modern translations render as “Do not hold onto me.”

Well-known renditions of this scene like that by [Titian](#) in 1594, might reflect earlier translations of the Bible like that of Tyndale in 1526 “touche me not.” Yet prohibition does not describe the scene: Titian's picture centers on the interaction of the two figures. Mary's hand reaches towards Christ. The curve of Christ's body leans towards Mary as one hand holds back the clothing.¹ A gardening implement frames and curtails what might be an upward movement of ascension echoed by the tree heming in the two figures.

There is another interpretation of their meeting perhaps less well-known in Mahalia Jackson's version of “[Come to the Garden.](#)” The hymn verses describe first someone alone in a garden and then the joy of meeting, recognition, and ongoing companionship in a shared walk. All who sing or hear the song become the woman meeting Jesus in the garden. C.

1 David Brown, Sylvia Ferrino Pagden, Jaynie Anderson, *Bellini, Giorgione, Titian and the Renaissance of Venetian Painting* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006) p.128 report that x-rays of the painting show that the figure of Christ changed from moving left stiffly to the present dynamic spiral motion.

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Austin Miles wrote the hymn in March 1912 while meditating on the meeting between Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden. "As the light faded," he said, "I seemed to be standing at the entrance of a garden, looking down a gently winding path, shaded by olive branches. A woman in white, with head bowed, hand clasping her throat, as if to choke back her sobs, walked slowly into the shadows. It was Mary." He continues, "As she leaned her head upon her arm at the tomb, she wept. Turning herself, she saw Jesus standing, so did I. I knew it was He. She knelt before Him, with arms outstretched and looking into His face cried 'Rabboni!'"

While some may find the hymn mawkish and sentimental, the idea behind it is not in fact new. It derives from a second-century literary trope in which the scene of Mary at the empty tomb expands to portray her search in the garden as the woman of the Song of Songs inquiring for and eventually finding her beloved. Her search, the meeting, and the walk in the garden are the opposite of "Do not hold onto me." How did the meeting of Mary and Jesus in the garden generate and maintain opposite interpretations of ban and blessing?

Gathering the traditions

We know that Mary Magdalene exists in interpretative traditions expanding far beyond the biblical text in which she is witness, apostle, penitent, and contemplative. A recent writer, for example, discusses her as apostle, beloved, and archetype of divine wisdom.² In Christian tradition, her witness to the resurrected Jesus is followed by Jesus' commission that she preach the good news of the resurrection to apostles. In patristic writings, she merges with Mary of Bethany or an anonymous woman who anoints Jesus (in Luke 7) and becomes a model penitent from whom Jesus casts out seven demons. In Ethiopic tradition, "Mary of the perfume" anoints Jesus. Syriac traditions identify the Mary figure at the empty tomb and in the garden as Jesus' mother. The challenge is not so much to classify these images as to hold them together.

2 *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*, Cynthia Bourgeault (2010). Scholarship on Mary Magdalene is immense: see <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=215> for an overview. Accessed May 17th 17.25pm.

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Mary in the Garden

In traditions of both ban and blessing, the garden is the place of meeting. How is it that Mary and Jesus meet there? All four gospels of the New Testament record that desolate and despairing women go to Jesus' tomb two days after the crucifixion to anoint the body. They are astonished not just to find it empty and the body gone but to see and hear interpreting angels at the empty tomb declare: "He is not here, he has been raised, as he said" (Matthew 28:6). In every New Testament gospel except Mark's, a resurrected Jesus then appears first to women and then to others.

It's the version in John's gospel that features a garden and a gardner. After Jesus' death, Mary weeps alone outside the tomb in a setting John identifies as a garden.³ When two angels ask why she weeps, she explains that she does not know where the body has been taken. Turning, she sees someone whom she takes for the gardener who also asks why she is weeping. "Tell me where you have taken him and I will remove the body," she says. In perhaps the most famous recognition scene of the New Testament, Jesus says "Mary!" Recognizing him she responds, "Rabbouni! (Teacher)!" Then Jesus commands and commissions her, "Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father but go, say to my brothers that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:11-17).

John's garden location passes into tradition. Paintings like that of Fra Angelico and Titian include the garden while others render Jesus as a gardner complete with gardening hat and gardening implements.

The Prohibition

Words of Jesus to Mary in the garden, "Do not touch me" or the more recent translation, "Do not hold onto me" were understood for a long time as a prohibition caused by something Mary did. In the 4th Century, [Codex Sinaiticus](#) preserved a corrector's addition to the text of John 20:16 after Mary's address to Jesus, "Rabboni!" namely, "and she ran to

³ "Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid" John 19:41.

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touch him.” The addition doesn't belong in the text but it does clarify Jesus' warning words in the next verse. Augustine of Hippo in the 4th Century explained that the experience of physical touch limited Mary Magdalene's experience of the divine.⁴ Jerome thought that Mary was unworthy since she didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus.⁵ And a marginal gloss in the much later Geneva Bible (1560) clarifies, “because she was to(o) much addicted to the corporeal presence, Christ teaches her to lift her mind by faith into heaven where onlie after his ascension he remaineth.”

All of these readings not only introduce explanations for Mary's reach towards Jesus on the basis of ideas imported into the text but also give particular weight to Jesus' opening words in John 20:17. Maybe equal weight should be given to the remaining words in the sentence spoken to Mary: “Do not hold on to me, *because I have not yet ascended to the Father*. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” If equal weight were given to both parts of Jesus' sentence, the issue might not lie so much with Mary but with the explanatory clause in which Jesus' bodily state is explained as transitioning towards ascending. If Mary is not to continue holding, it is because Jesus' physical body is in transition which is why he explains, “because I have not yet ascended to my Father..”

For this reason, some interpreters and modern translations soften the prohibition by rendering the present tense of the verb as “Do not cling to me.” Whilst in a temporary state, Jesus would then prohibit not touch but clinging. This makes sense of the imperative verb both in John 20 and the wider context of New Testament gospels that characterize Jesus' ministry during his life as one of touching or being touched by people so as to hold and heal.

Touch in the Gospels

Touch is a hallmark of Jesus' ministry in New Testament synoptic gospels in distinction to John. Mark's gospel, for example, explores ways Jesus is tangible. Jesus reaches for and grasps people to heal them by the power of God. This makes Jesus accessible and

4 Augustine, *Serm*, 244.2-3.

5 Jerome, *Epistle* 59.

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vulnerable.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Mark, Jesus holds Simon Peter's mother in law by the hand, raising her up from a bed of fever. He then extends his hand (either in anger or compassion, the text is not clear) and touches a leper who requests healing (1:41). Sometime later, a woman in a state of impurity lays a hand on his garment and is healed. In the same episode, Jesus touches a corpse and raises a young girl thought to have died. But the actions and force with which he reaches out to heal are reversed in the course of the narrative. Those around Jesus-- perhaps his family, perhaps his disciples-- seek to restrain him early in his ministry, thinking him unbalanced (Mark 3:21). A crowd presses against him, restricting movement (5:31). His healing ability is inhibited by the skepticism of those in his hometown (Mark 6:5). In the latter half of the gospel, opponents seize people Jesus knows: John the Baptist, the naked young man in the garden, and finally Jesus too. The pendulum of Mark's gospel is that until an arrest, Jesus raises people up and heals them from sickness and death in the face of some opposition and disbelief. Then he is seized and arrested, tried and killed. After crucifixion, he is raised by God to new life.

Mark's Jesus can heal the daughter of the Syrophenician woman from a distance (Mark 7) but he heals people more frequently by touching, laying on of hands and holding them firmly. In describing an angry and compassionate Jesus; in showing Jesus being inhibited from healing by doubts of others and having others take healing from him, and in being tortured and crucified, Mark seems to be meditating on the wonder of Jesus' physical body from which power seems to ebb and flow. To Mark's presentation of a tangible, even porous body of Jesus, John's portrait of Jesus' resurrected body in transition is complimentary.

Matthew's gospel is a bridge between Mark and John. While Matthew's gospel takes over from Mark the portrait of a Jesus who heals by touching (Greek: *haptomai*) and holding firmly (Greek: *krateo*), uses of the latter verb decrease in relation to Mark. But the verb is more prominent in the narrative of Jesus' arrest and trial (26:4, 48, 50, 55, 57), in other violent actions such as the arrest of John (14:3) and the violent seizure of one slave by another (18:28; 22:6). And it also occurs in Matthew's resurrection account where it has no

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parallel in Mark since there is no resurrection account in Mark's gospel. Having been commissioned by the angel at the empty tomb to tell Jesus' disciples that "he has been raised," Mary Magdalene and the other Mary encounter Jesus. Jesus greets them and they in turn come towards him, grasp his feet and worship him (Matthew 28:9).

Holly Hearon believes Matthew 28:9-10 draws on an oral source indicated by the presence of non-Matthean phrases including use of the verb "to grasp" with "his feet" as the object.⁶ But she recognizes that the whole verse in its present form is Matthean in its use of the two verbs "come towards" (Greek: *proserchomai*) and "worship." In fact, Matthew uses the former as an adverbial participle quite often e.g.: "Jesus came and said to them..." (28:18). So Matthew reports that the women hold the feet of the resurrected Jesus. To understand this aspect of Jesus' physical presence makes a reading of Jesus' words to Mary in John's Gospel as "Do not cling to me" and thus not as outright ban more likely.

Women at the Tomb

Images of two or more holy women at the tomb of Christ exist from the early fifth century onwards. In the [Rabbula Gospels](#) from the Biblioteca Laurentiana in Florence dated to 586, a resurrected Christ in the lower right corner greets the two Marys with hands extended whilst they reach hands out towards him. Similarly, in a 9th Century ivory diptych from the Cathedral Museum in Milan, Jesus appears to two kneeling women whose hands are outstretched towards him. One of his hands extends in blessing over them behind which is a tree reaching upwards.

A more individualized encounter can be seen somewhat later in an ivory [plaque](#) dated 1115-1120 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The upper scene is the appearance of Christ to two disciples on the road to Emmaus while the lower scene shows and encounter between Jesus and Mary. With head averted, his right hand points towards her head while both her arms and hands extend towards him beneath his. The inscription reads "Dominus loquitur Marie"-- "the Lord speaks to Mary" which could simply be it's title but

⁶ Holly Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities* (Michael Glazier: Liturgical Press, 2004) 70-71.

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the Metropolitan Museum, perhaps taken by the dramatic gestures of both figures, entitles the image “Noli Me Tangere.” Perhaps this ivory represents a transition to the later “Noli Me Tangere” type of which the Titian painting mentioned at the beginning of this essay is an example.

The Search for Jesus

Descriptions of a prolonged search by women for Jesus after death go back to the second century. A commentary on the Song of Songs (attributed to Hippolytus whose dates are 170-235, but some scholars regard its authorship unattributed and date the commentary to the second century CE) describes a nocturnal search for the lover using the text of Song of Songs 3 as an analogy to the search of Martha and Mary for Jesus. The commentary is based on John 20 but seems also to know other traditions of two women at the tomb as myrrhbearers since it specifically identifies Martha and Mary neither of whom are identified together in any gospel account of a search for Jesus. And since the commentary mentions “Martha and Mary” without specifying which Mary, the Mary of the commentary may well be Mary of Bethany, the woman who anointed Jesus (John 12). Some regard this figure not as Mary Magdalene but other scholars posit that she may well have already been identified with Mary Magdalene.

The commentary describes the woman's search to include looking, questioning the night-watchman and finally finding, holding, and refusing to let the loved one go. In fact it is the earliest text to call the women *myrrhophores* (myrrhbearers) “apostles to the apostles.” But there is a double analogy made by the commentary for it sees in the search of the women for the beloved a search by the synagogue and also believers for Christ. And because the commentary uses the first person singular voice of the text of the Song of Songs, the womens' search is also articulated in the first person singular and plural, “Have you not seen him whom my soul loves?” in contrast to the gospel narratives which use the third person. In the ongoing narrative of the commentary, the search is successful and the lovers' hold of each other replaces what other church fathers like Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome read as a prohibition to Mary Magdalene not much later:

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“The Savior therefore answered and said, 'Martha, Mary.' And they said, 'Rabbi,' which means 'My Lord.' 'I found him whom I have loved and would not let him go.' For it was then that she took hold of his feet, holding them tightly. And crying out he says to her, 'Do not touch me for I have not yet ascended to my Father.' And she (the spouse) held on and said, 'I will not let you go until I bring you into my heart. I will lead you into the treasures of my mother's house and the treasures of the one who conceived me.' The love of Christ was gathered in her breast and she did not wish to be moved. Because of this she cries out and says, 'I have found him and do not wish to let him go.'”

Yancy Smith interprets the intensified search and the women's grasp of Jesus' feet as Hippolytus' portrait of a desire for union with Christ. We see here, he thinks, early Christian desire for Christ in which the fault of Eve is transformed by the ardent desire of Mary and Martha. Hippolytus describes Eve, in the person of the myrrhophores, taking the fruit of the tree of life and giving it to the male disciples, who represent Adam.

”From now on she will no longer either crave or proffer to men food that corrupts; she has received incorruptibility; from now on she is in unity and [is] a helper, for Adam leads Eve. O good helper, with the gospel offering (or sacrificing) [it] to her husband! This is why the women evangelized the Disciples.”⁷

Yancy thinks that the commentary gives prominence to Martha and Mary to downplay the significance of Mary Magdalene in non-canonical texts. But by the second century, I think the composite identity of Mary Magdalene is already evident⁸ and, if this is so, it is reasonable to see in depictions of the myrrhbearing women who cling to the feet of the resurrected Jesus not only the ardent desire of early (Jewish and Gentile) believers for union with Christ but also the women apostles themselves –including the Magdalene--who longed

7 In Cant. 25.8 Cited in *The Mystery of the Anointing: Hippolytus' Commentary on the Song of Songs in Social and Critical Contexts* by Yancy W. Smith. Unpublished PhD. Dissertation. Brite Divinity School 2008. This book includes a translation of the Georgian text, the most complete text of the commentary on the Song of Songs, a translation of the Greek epitome, and surviving fragments in paleo-Slavonic.

8 Clement (150-215CE) Excerpta 50,1 and Paidagogus 2,8. A different and composite Mary (Magdalene) figure can be seen in texts also dated to the 2nd Century: the Dialogue of the Savior, the Gospel of Thomas and the Sophia of Jesus Christ. A more widely recognized and acknowledged conflation occurs in the fourth century and later.

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for and would not let him go.

The determined clinging of Mary and Martha is not just that of figures in the text but is an action to be emulated by believers, according to religious leaders of the time. Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386) gave several baptismal lectures to candidates for Christian baptism. In the fourteenth baptismal lecture, Cyril clearly understands Mary Magdalene to embrace Jesus and that candidates for baptism should want to do the same.⁹ Cyril puts quotations from the Song of Songs in the mind and mouth of the women. In Cyril's account, the women of Matthew's gospel appear alongside Mary Magdalene in John:-

The Bridegroom and Suitor of souls was sought by those noble and brave women. They came, those blessed ones, to the sepulchre, and sought Him Who had been raised, and the tears were still dropping from their eyes, when they ought rather to have been dancing with joy for Him that had risen. Mary came seeking Him, according to the Gospel, and found Him not: and presently she heard from the Angels, and afterwards saw the Christ. Are then these things also written? He says in the Song of Songs, On my bed I sought Him whom my soul loved. At what season? By night on my bed I sought Him Whom my soul loved: Mary, it says, came while it was yet dark. On my bed I sought Him by night, I sought Him, and I found Him not. And in the Gospels Mary says, They have taken away my Lord, and I know nowhere they have laid Him.¹⁰

When the angels asked the women why they sought the living among the dead, Cyril adds, "But she knew not, and in her person the Song of Songs said to the Angels, Saw ye Him Whom my soul loved? It was but a little that I passed from them (that is, from the two Angels), until I found Him Whom my soul loved. I held Him, and would not let Him go."¹¹ Although Cyril follows Hippolytus in using the Song of Songs as a prism through which to view the visit of the women to the tomb, Cyril has a distinct reading. It is he who sees Mary as first witness to the resurrection. Yancy supposes that Hippolytus writes catechetical instruction for elite women in Rome new to the faith and for such women the women

9 Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 23,3.

10 Cyril, Cat. 14,12. Hippolytus' Commentary on the Song of Songs is the likely source.

11 Cyril, Cat. 14,13.

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apostles at the tomb might have provided a model of ardent devotion. But what of Cyril of Jerusalem writing for a different audience of catechumens at a different time and place about women holding Jesus' feet and, in the same context, Mary of John's gospel who, when she found him whom she sought, clung to him with fervor? Cyril does not mention the ban "Noli me tangere."

Mary's search for Jesus continues in the so-called *Biblia Pauperum* or "Bible of the Poor." The origins of this book are unknown but by the late middle ages, there are many examples of it. Reflecting a widespread method of interpreting the Bible by means of typology, in the Bible of the Poor persons, objects and episodes from the Old Testament are seen to prefigure aspects of Christ's ministry. The book is a book-block with pictures and text produced by impressions from carved wooden blocks. Between 1460-90, the book-block was a transitional form of publication leading to book printing by moveable type. Whether the book was really designed to educate the poor or whether it was intended to instruct clergy in their preaching is uncertain. However, printing undoubtedly facilitated spread of the book.

Three panels on a single page depict scenes thought to be typologically interrelated. In one example we see Christ appearing to Mary Magdalene in the garden in the central panel. This is an interpretation of John 20. Christ holds a garden implement in a garden setting. In the panel to the left we see the King of Babylon visiting Daniel the morning after Daniel had been cast into the lion's den. Discovering Daniel to be alive brought the king great joy. The Latin above the panel continues: "Indeed the king prefigures Mary Magdalene when she went to the tomb. After she saw the Lord, she also rejoiced exceedingly because he rose from the dead."

The panel on the right is entitled, "The Daughter of Sion discovers her Spouse." It shows the bride and bridegroom embracing each other. It is a reference to chapter 3 of the Song of Songs. The Latin inscription declares, "We read in the Canticle of Canticles, chapter 3, that when the bride had found her beloved, she said, 'I have found him whom my soul loves; I will hold him and I will not let him go.' This bride prefigures Mary Magdalene who seeing her spouse, that is Christ, wanted to touch Him. Christ responded, 'Do not touch me; I have not yet ascended to my Father.'" The inscriptions under the panel read: "The beloved

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bride now enjoys the much sought spouse” and “Showing yourself O Christ you console the holy Mary.”

In this panel we see the juxtaposition of the two themes of this essay: the ban and blessing of John 20. The central panel shows Jesus and Mary Magdalene encountering each other in the garden of John 20. Jesus is identified by the cruciform nimbus. The same figure occurs in the panel on the right in which the bride of the Song of Songs has wrapped her arms around the bride Jesus while the scroll above her head (medieval equivalent of bubble speak) shows her speaking the words of the bride in Song of Songs 3: “Tenui eum nec dimittam: I held him and I will not let him go.”

Two inscriptions under the panel, “The beloved bride now enjoys the much sought spouse” and “Showing yourself O Christ you console the holy Mary” seem to indicate that while the scene renders both “Do not cling to me” and “I held him and I will not let him go,” the emphasis of the scene is on the encounter in the garden and the solace Jesus offers Mary not the prohibition of clinging. This balance allows us to see how later depictions of the scene proscribing further touch like that of Titian can nevertheless infer exactly the opposite: an ongoing encounter.

Musical settings of women at the empty tomb

From the 10th Century onwards for six hundred years, liturgical use of the visit of women to the empty tomb (*Visitatio sepulchri*) at Easter, although formally stable, changed in style and function.¹² Liturgical ceremony itself is stable: to the core element of the procession of Marys and Martha to the tomb where they met an angel, material is reused and over a longer period, there are additions. In style, this trope changed from prose to metrical texts. Musically, the form changed from chant modes to tones using octaves, corresponding to general musical changes. In function the ceremonies changed from cult ritual to didactic ceremony and eventually to popular performance. The core metrical element seems to be the Latin text rendered as an antiphon: “Tell us Mary, say what you saw on the way” with the

12 Susan K. Rankin, “The Mary Magdalene scene in the *Visitatio sepulchri* ceremonies” in Iain Fenlon, ed., *Early Music History: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Music* (New York: CUP, 1981, digital version 2009).

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response, “The tomb the Living did enclose; I saw Christ's glory as He rose!”¹³

This is the collective voice of chant. In such examples we find representations of the women's search for and meeting with the risen Jesus. Later additions from the 12th and 13th Centuries and subsequently, include the visit of Mary Magdalene alone to the tomb where she met the risen Christ. These additions included a prohibition and a new preface rendering the Vulgate of John 20:11 as Mary's lament. Susan Rankin says that through the addition of lament, “Mary's role is emotively developed” and that this element is connected to the eleventh century expansion of interest in her and the specific portrait of Mary now understood as Mary of Bethany, the woman sinner, and Mary who encountered the risen Christ. ¹⁴ Thus in the earlier *Victimae paschali laudes* there is no rendition of any prohibition.

Now the first person singular voice of searching women that we saw in the second-century commentary on the Song of Songs attributed to Hippolytus and the forms of the *Visitatio sepulchri* with its eleventh century additions continues in the much later compositions of Easter music by women musicians and composers who were nuns: Sulpecia Cesis and Chiara Margarita Cozzolani. Chiara Margarita Cozzolani (1602-1677), a nun of the community of St Radegonda in Milan was a prolific composer. In 1650 she wrote a motet which describes the search of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb. By giving long phrases to the singer of Magdalene's lament with texts from the Song of Songs, Cozzolani extends not only the lament but the encounter between the woman and the angel and the specific description of the resurrected Jesus as the bridegroom in the Song of Songs. It is a creative expansion of the encounter between Jesus and Mary in the garden to extend a text well beyond the question and answer of John's gospel. And yet it is not free form: the expansion uses biblical text that has already from the second century been used to interpret the encounter of Mary and Jesus in the garden. In this version of the motet the material in bold highlights inclusion of texts from the Song of Songs:

Mary Magdalene stood at the tomb, weeping; while she mourned, she turned to the tomb

¹³ *Victimae Paschali Laudes* in which the antiphon is found is the sequence for Easter Sunday thought to originate in the 10th Century.

¹⁴ Rankin, *ibid.* 255.

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and saw two angels in white sitting there, and said to them:

Nun quem diligit anima mea vidistis?

Have you seen him whom my soul seeks?

Mulier, quid ploras? Quem quaeris?

Woman, why do you weep? Whom do you seek?

They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put him. **I searched for him in the night and did not find him.**

Qualis est dilectus tuus ex dilecto,

O pulcherrima mulierium?

Who is your beloved among beloveds?

O most beautiful of women?

Dilectus meus candidus et rubicundus, electus ex millibus; totus amabilis, totus desiderabilis.

My beloved is white and ruddy, chosen among thousands; completely loveable, completely desirable.

Dic nobis Maria, quis est dilectus tuus?

Tell us Mary, who is your beloved?

Dilectus meus, amor meus speciosus forma prae filiis hominum Crucifixus Jesus est.

My beloved is beautiful amongst the sons of men, he is the crucified Jesus.

O mea lux, ubi es? O amor meus, ubi es?

O vita mea, ubi es? Veni dilecti mi, amore tuo languo, amore tuo moriar.

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O my light, where are you? O my love, where are you? O my life, where are you? Come, my beloved, for I languish for your love. I am dying for your love.

Quid quaeris viventum cum mortuis?

Surrexit; non est hic! Praecedet vos in Galileam, alleluia, Maria. Noli amplius plorare, gaude, laetare.

Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is risen; he is not here! He will go before you to Galilee. Weep no more but rejoice and be glad.

Thus, expansive musical traditions setting the search and encounter of the women at the tomb in the garden with the risen Jesus by using texts from the Song of Songs continue in 17th Century motets and the 20th Century hymn “Come to the Garden” with which this essay began. However, the final piece of evidence in this history of Mary’s encounter with Jesus as blessing and ban emerges in another modern reading of “Noli Me Tangere” not as prohibition but as blessing.

Titian's Noli Me Tangere as blessing

A national reading of Titian's Noli me Tangere painting as blessing emerges in the middle of the 20th Century. During the Second World War, to keep them safe but in the country, paintings from London’s National Gallery were hidden in Welsh mines. Two years later, the public complained that contemporary art and concerts were taking place in the National Gallery but there were no great paintings to see. After considerable deliberation the trustees decided that one picture a month could hang in the National Gallery even at great risk. After canvassing the nation to discover which picture should be brought back first to be seen, Kenneth Clarke, the director, discovered to his astonishment that everyone requested Titian’s ‘Noli me Tangere.’

Neal MacGregor, recent director of the National Gallery, speculates that what drew the public to Titian's painting within the context of nightly bombings and air raids on

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London is the encounter between the living and the dead.¹⁵ MacGregor's reading of the painting seems to center on the hands of Jesus and Mary which are often the center of artistic depiction and implied but not described in the text. Titian depicts the moment when Mary Magdalene reaches out to touch Christ and as he draws away, he leans over and blesses her. The painting is an investigation of what happens to physical love after death; of how physical love and spiritual love meet or don't meet, but can be reconciled. MacGregor sees it as an incomparable meditation on love continuing without physical contact, without physical proximity, as Christ protects, blesses, and loves without allowing physical touch.

MacGregor's reading of Titian's "Noli me Tangere" brings us to a place where "Do Not Cling To Me" is read through the experience of World-War II as an encounter in which enforced separation of death is overcome in a painting showing the connection between the living and the (resurrected) dead. Such a reading can of course be seen as specific to a particular circumstance and place. But it can also be seen as a direct consequence of versions of the same encounter between Jesus and Mary in the garden before the type "Noli me Tangere" came into existence. These extend from early interpretations of Mary at the tomb (e.g. by Cyril of Jerusalem) through the medieval Bible of the Poor and in later musical traditions in which the bride in the Song of Songs looks for, finds and refuses to let her lover and bridegroom go. X rays of Titian's painting show that "Christ was originally painted wearing a gardener's hat and turning away from the Magdalen."¹⁶ In the end, Titian's painting in the garden shows a figure whose posture and demeanor opens up a long tradition of reading of Jesus' encounter with Mary in which the ban, "Do not cling to me," is in fact blessing.

15 Neal MacGregor, "A Pentecost in Trafalgar Square", in Cuno, James (ed.). *Whose Muse? Art Museums and the Public Trust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2004) 27-49.

16 <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-noli-me-tangere> accessed May 19th 2012 at 16.49pm.