
Letting Go

John 20.11-20

A Sermon preached at the Easter Sunrise service, Duke Gardens, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I began to learn classical Greek at the age of 12. I wish I could say it was out of devotion to reading the New Testament in its original language. But the truth is, it was part of a long, arduous, carefully-orchestrated and ultimately successful campaign to avoid taking physics and chemistry. The first Greek word I learned was the first person singular present tense indicative verb *LUO*. I quickly discovered it means “I loose.” You learn it on day one of the Greek class because it’s a short, regular verb that’s easy to conjugate. It’s a particularly useful verb for those who’re in the habit of tying up oxen or releasing mules. Now, as a 12-year-old boy from a small town I didn’t have a lot of life experience to bring to sentences like “I would have loosed the oxen,” or “They are going to loose the donkeys,” let alone “I would have loosed,” “I used to loose,” and “I was going to have loosed.”

But then comes the great day when you first pick up a copy of the New Testament in its original Greek. And then you enter a new world. You read the end of the raising of Lazarus story, and, as Lazarus comes out of the tomb, Jesus says, “Unbind him and let him go.” And we see this word *LUO* means “Unbind him.” Turns out it’s useful for more than oxen. You read the sonorous words of Ephesians, “He has broken down the dividing wall of hostility,” and discover the word for “broken down” is our little friend *LUO*. You look at the description of Jesus in the book of Revelation and see “Him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood,” there’s *LUO* again, freeing us from our sins. And in a passage from Acts often read on Easter Day, Peter says, “God raised Jesus up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” – and there is *LUO* yet again, in the freeing from death.

So little *LUO* gets to make an appearance at all of these and plenty of other moments in the New Testament. And what all these moments have in common is that each one of them paints a picture of resurrection. Resurrection is the defeat of death, the reconciling of hostile parties, the raising from the tomb, the healing of the sick, the restoration of the outcast, and the forgiveness of sins. *LUO* starts off meaning loosing donkeys but ends up meaning all of these things.

And when we get to this most precious Easter moment of all, the meeting of Mary Magdalene with Jesus in the garden, this little and apparently insignificant word *LUO* gives us a clue to one of the mysteries of the story. Why, when Mary finally recognizes Jesus, does Jesus say, “Do not hold on to me” – or in the older translations, “Do not cling to me” – or in the famous Latin translation, “*Noli me tangere*”? The answer lies in that little word *LUO*. Because resurrection means letting go. Jesus looses us from the threat of death, Jesus looses us from sickness, exile, estrangement and sin. What his ambitions are for oxen and donkeys we never fully discover, but Jesus sure has a lot of use for that little word *LUO*. Jesus is in the loosing business. That’s the message of Easter. Jesus looses us, he makes us soar, he sets us free, he lets us run, he lets us fly, he lets us live, he sets us on our feet again.

And our response to the good news of Easter is to learn to let go. To let go of our own sin, in the first place. To permit God in Christ to forgive us and heal us. To allow ourselves to be defined not by the dreadful things we’ve done but by the wondrous things God’s done. And in letting go of our own sin to let go of sins done to us. Not to cling on to resentment and bitterness, but to recognize how those who have hurt us have participated in a realm of damage that preceded them and will outlast them and is largely not of their making, and to make a fundamental choice to see ourselves not as a victim but as a child of grace.

And in letting go of our bitterness to let go of our life. Not to cling so tightly on to our life that all we can think about is how we keep it longer or extend it further, but to let go of our life so that we allow God to take it, use it, play with it and enjoy it wherever and however and for as long or as short as he wants to. And in letting go of our life to let go of one another’s lives, that we face the loss and death of those we love not with the vice-like grip of possession and denial but with gentleness and gratitude and mercy and compassion. And part of that is about forgiving God for taking these precious people away from us.

Do not cling to me, says Jesus, because I have come to loose you – I have come to let you go. This is half of the good news of Easter. God looses us, forgives us, and sets us free to live with him forever, unburdened by our hurts and failures in this life. But the other half of the good news of Easter is that God is wholly committed to us, to each one of us, to his whole creation, and that he keeps his promises to restore us to life and keep us in his company forever.

In the end the good news of the Christian gospel lies in the paradox of that tiny word *LUO*. On the one hand our deepest delight is that God sets us free. On the other hand our strongest hope is that God never lets us go. Today we find the strength to let go of all that stands between us and eternal life, content and elated in the good news that God never lets us go. God looses us; but he never lets us go.