
Jesus Said to Mary, "Do Not Hold on to Me"

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

Almost all the pieces of art in my home living room share a distinctive feature. They are of faces, some real and some imagined, some clear and some ambiguous, but all of them speaking to me. I love faces. I love their ability to express the details of the human soul. Since I cannot draw, I appreciate all the more a great artist's ability to draw a face.

However, one piece in my living room collection breaks the pattern. It is a lithograph copy of a quite famous and dramatic painting, one of my favorites: the representation of the crucifixion called "Christ of St. John of the Cross," by Salvador Dali.

One of the distinctive features of Dali's "Christ of St. John of the Cross" is that it does not show the actual face of Jesus. From a background of pure black, Jesus hangs from an almost horizontal cross, faced downwards. Apparently, Dali used as inspiration an actual drawing of Christ's crucifixion by the great St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth century mystic and poet.

However, I also believe that Dali's portrayal, refusing to show us the face of Jesus, and appearing on such a dark canvas, also captures the sense of one of the great poems and meditations of St. John of the Cross. In the poem, "Dark Night of the Soul," St. John of the Cross explores our human search for God when all seems anguished and lost. We go through times of darkness, times of empty anguish, in our longing for the holiness of God.

Thus, though this painting of the crucifixion expresses some of the darkness of life, it also represents the power of Christ even when we cannot see his face. Christ presides over our salvation even when we cannot see his face.

Last week, as I traveled to Iona, Scotland (surely a blessed place) for a clergy retreat, I traveled through Glasgow. Glasgow, with all due respect, is a fine town, but also a fairly rugged and industrial one. I spent only one night there, but the first thing I did was visit its Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. There, in that northern, very un-Dali town, hangs the original painting of "Christ of St. John of the Cross." I was on a holy pilgrimage.

I was mesmerized, however, not only by the painting's power, but by the very location of that painting in a town way up in Scotland. There is a long story of how the painting ended up there; but I am glad it resides there" and not in one of the more spectacular collections of Dali's pieces. It is not what one would expect.

It is expectation of what Christ looks like, and how he saves, that often gets in the way of who Christ really is. So it was for Mary Magdalene, the first witness of the resurrected Christ, who thought at first, that Christ was the gardener. She had known Jesus almost all of his ministry, and she mistook him for the gardener?

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me," which I take to mean, "Do not hold on to your past experiences of me, no matter how dramatic and powerful." Jesus can appear to us even as a gardener, even in a faraway country, even in darkness, even without a face at all.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
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