

Grief in the Gardens: Tracing the Tears from Gethsemane to Golgotha

“Why are you weeping?” (John 19:41-20:18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on March 27, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ When was the last time you had a good cry at the end of a movie or book? Maybe you weren't sobbing into your sleeves but at least your eyes got watery. Good stories have a way of doing that. Touching emotions. Tugging heart strings. Evoking reactions. Especially when the story is dark and the situation looks incredibly hopeless, where everything in the plot line looks bleak and grim. But then suddenly, like a shaft of light breaking through pitch darkness, something unforeseen, something unbelievable, something momentous occurs and everything is turned around – for the better. It suddenly all works out for a happy ending.
 - ▶ There's a word for that. It's a **eucatastrophe**. That's a term coined by J.R.R Tolkien who wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. It's a combination of the word “catastrophe” and *eu-* the Greek prefix for “good”. So you have the word eulogy, which literally means a “good word”. When you eulogize someone, you're saying a good word about them.
 - **So, according to Tolkien, a eucatastrophe is a good catastrophe** – a sudden turn of events that results in good. It's a joyful catastrophe that comes out of nowhere at the end of a story and changes everything for the better.

- ❖ So Tolkien would often lead his stories to a very dark place where it looks like our heroes will be defeated, where evil will triumph, where darkness will reign. But then suddenly the eagles come out of nowhere and rescue the day.
 - ▶ Or think of the climactic scene in the *Return of the King* where Frodo succumbs to the temptation of the Ring. He refuses to destroy it. Sauron and his army are about to defeat the remaining forces of good led by Aragon. It looks as if evil has triumphed. When suddenly Gollum appears; snatches the Ring; and in an epic struggle falls, with the Ring, into the fires of Mordor. And it's all over. Tragedy suddenly turns into joy. Defeat turns into victory. It's a perfect eucatastrophe.

- ❖ **And Tolkien says the Resurrection is essentially the eucatastrophe of the gospel story.** Everything looks grim. The Messiah is bruised, battered, and bloody. Hanging on a cross. Evil has won. Darkness has overcome. Hope has been extinguished. The Serpent, that great Dragon the Devil, laughed and celebrated. **But then early Sunday morning, while it was still dark – a eucatastrophe.** The stone was rolled away and suddenly, out of nowhere, everything changed for the better.

- ❖ Now Tolkien had a friend who loved writing and telling fairytale stories, and his friend saw the story of Christ and the Resurrection as just that – a nice fairytale. The friend's name was C.S. Lewis. Tolkien was so patient and wise with his non-Christian colleague.
 - ▶ He said you're right. **The Gospel is a fairytale.** One that fills you with awe and wonder. It draws you in. You feel the despair as the storyline moves towards the cross. You're so engrossed that when the eucatastrophe finally comes, you feel like you're a part of it. You're brought to the point of tears. That's what good stories do. And Tolkien's point to Lewis was that Christ and the Resurrection is just like any other fairytale but with this monumental difference – *it really happened*.

- ❖ **I honestly don't see how you can enjoy these stories if you don't believe in the Resurrection.** If it's real and you believe it, then the next time you read or watch a story with a eucatastrophic ending – where victory is suddenly wrested out of the hands of evil – when you get to the end, you'll be bursting with joy. Maybe you'll even shed a tear. Because you'll say to yourself, "This is going to happen." The stories are true. The end of my story, the end of our story, will be something like this. **There is a hero on a white steed who will appear on the horizon at just the right time.** There is a Savior who will trample on death, crush the serpent, and slay the dragon.
 - ▶ But if the Resurrection is not real or you don't believe in it, then you'll come to the end of a eucatastrophe, and you might be weeping, but for different reasons. Because you'll be thinking, "That's a happy ending but too bad life's not like that. Too bad it never works out that way." It's depressing. But don't you see? **The fact that you long for happy endings – that you enjoy eucatastrophic endings – suggests that the Resurrection is true.** At least it means deep down you want it to be true.
- ❖ Friends, on this Easter morning, as we consider our text, I want to show you three things about the Resurrection. 1) The Resurrection is a historical event to be believed. 2) It's a personal event to be experienced. 3) It's an earth-shattering event to be proclaimed.

A Historical Event to be Believed

- ❖ **The first thing to stress from our passage is how it points to the historical reliability of the Resurrection as an event that took place in space and time.** The Apostle John tells us at the end of chapter 19 that Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple, was given possession of Jesus' body. And with the help of Nicodemus (whom Jesus encountered back in John 3), they hastily wrapped the body in linen clothes and seventy-five pounds worth of spices. There was more to be done according to Jewish burial customs, but because the Sabbath was upon them, they placed the body in a garden tomb that was close at hand.
 - ▶ The traditional site for the garden tomb can be visited today if you go to Jerusalem. **The Church of the Holy Sepulchre** is built on top of it. People visit the church and observe centuries of traditions, whether liturgical or doctrinal, all mixed together, and **some conclude this is all a tradition.** The early church must've developed this legend, this tradition, of Jesus being bodily resurrected and appearing to his disciples.
- ❖ But I see a number of reasons in this passage to believe in the Resurrection as a real historical event. **First, notice how Mary's reaction when confronted with the empty tomb was to assume it was grave robbers.** Even though Jesus, at many times and places, predicted his Resurrection, his disciples didn't get it. They weren't expecting it. A bodily resurrection from the dead wasn't in their plausibility structure.
 - ▶ But when Peter and John (the other disciple) arrive, the first thing they notice are the linen clothes lying there. It signals to them that this couldn't have been the work of grave robbers. **If you're going to steal a corpse why would you undress it first?** Especially since you're not after the body but the expensive linen wrappings, the spices, and any treasure buried along. Clearly this was not the work of grave robbers.

- ❖ And the mention of the face cloth in v7 is significant, “*and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself.*” **The fact that this face cloth is folded up neatly on the side gives this impression that whatever happen here was not done hastily and chaotically.** Care had been taken. Someone tidied up. If it were grave robbers or the disciples who stole the body (a rumor spread by Jewish leaders; Mt. 28:11-15), they wouldn't have taken the time or even cared to neatly fold the face cloth.
 - ▶ **So you can't explain the empty tomb by suggesting robbery.** And let's be clear, the tomb certainly was empty. If the disciples just concocted these claims of seeing the Risen Lord, their rumors could've easily been squashed by simply producing the body. The early Jewish and Roman authorities had plenty of incentives to exhume the body since the growing Christian movement was becoming more of a threat to social order. **But they didn't produce the body because they couldn't.** It wasn't there.

- ❖ So when John enters the tomb in v8, and sees it empty with the linen wrappings left behind and the face cloth folded up, it says, “*he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.*”
 - ▶ **That means John saw evidence for the Resurrection and believed.** At this point, he had yet to understand that Scripture actually taught this. **And that proves the disciples weren't making up a Resurrection in order to fit their preconceived interpretations of Scripture that the Messiah would rise.** They weren't primed and ready, looking for signs of a Resurrection. They weren't even expecting it.

- ❖ So when faced with overwhelming evidence, it challenged their belief system. It blew up their plausibility structures. **But instead of ignorantly denying the plain evidence, John saw and believed.**
 - ▶ And I think it's worth noting that what he saw, at this point, was *not* the bodily Resurrected Lord. This was not a Resurrection appearance. That comes next. All John saw was an empty tomb and grave clothes. He didn't see Jesus.
 - Which puts us in his shoes. **This means even without a chance to see the Risen Lord with your own eyes, there's still enough evidence to believe he's alive.**

- ❖ I realize that, later on in chapter 20, **Thomas**, another disciple, insists that he'll never believe until he can see and touch Jesus for himself. But if that's normative, if that's the only way we can truly believe, then all of us are out of luck. Because besides the first disciples, no one else in the history of the Church has been graced with a Resurrection appearance.
 - ▶ But John's point is that you don't need it. **You can have genuine faith and confidence that Jesus is alive without having a visual on him.** That's the point. That's why John records the Lord's response to Thomas in chapter 20:29, “*Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*”

- ❖ **Faith without sight is superior.** It's more blessed to believe in the Resurrection because you understand what Scripture teaches, because you accept the overwhelming evidence coming from first-hand eyewitness accounts – it's more blessed to believe that way than to believe only what you can empirically see, hear, smell, taste, or touch.
 - ▶ **You're not at a disadvantage because you live in the 21st-century.** Because you didn't live in first-century Palestine. Because you didn't get a chance to see it for yourself. No, Jesus says you're actually advantaged. You're blessed. *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* The Scriptures are enough. With the Spirit's illuminating power, the Bible is sufficient to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15).

A Personal Event to be Experienced

- ❖ So there is solid evidence for us to make a rational conclusion that the tomb was empty and Jesus is alive. The Resurrection is a historical event to be believed. But there's more. Here's the second point: **The Resurrection is also a personal event to be experienced.**
 - ▶ This is where we turn to Mary Magdalene in v11. There it says she stood weeping outside the tomb. At this point, she's probably cried enough tears over Jesus' unjust crucifixion. Now she's grieving over her master's body being desecrated by grave robbers. Or so she assumes.
- ❖ But when she peers in the tomb, she sees two angels dressed in white. And they ask her a simple question, "*Why are you weeping?*" And it must've cut to the heart. It must've been so hard to answer. On one hand, she's simply mourning the loss of a loved one. She misses her master. She believes she'll no longer enjoy his company.
 - ▶ **But on a deeper level, it's very possible that Mary is crying over a sense of disillusionment, betrayal, and fear.** She had put so much hope in Jesus as the Messiah. In Luke's Gospel, Mary Magdalene is introduced as a woman who had seven demons cast out of her by Jesus (cf. Lk. 8:2).
 - So he gave her peace. He *was* her peace. But now he's gone. Her hopes are shattered. Her fears are back. She's thinking, "If Jesus is gone, then who's going to keep my demons at bay? Who's there to protect me? I'm alone again. I'm vulnerable again. I'm hopeless again." It's no wonder she's weeping.
- ❖ But she's seeking. That's the next thing she's asked. "*Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?*" (v15) Mary doesn't realize at first who's doing the asking. She senses that someone else is in the garden. She assumes, at this morning hour, it must be the gardner. And she asks him for the body. "Tell me where he is. I'll take him." She's searching for answers. She's seeking to the point of tears.
 - ▶ **And you might look at her and conclude this is what it means to be a spiritual seeker.** You have to be sincere. You have to be persistent. You have to be emotionally invested even to the point of tears. Seek God like this and you'll eventually find him. You might draw that conclusion – but it would be wrong.

- ❖ **The conclusion to be drawn here is that she's seeking, she's searching, she's shedding tears – but for a Jesus that doesn't exist.** Her concept of the Messiah is incomplete. Which explains why she doesn't recognize him even when he's standing right there.
 - ▶ That question, “**Whom are you seeking?**” is profound. At a deeper level, he's confronting her small expectations. “What kind of Messiah are you looking for? The Jesus you're seeking doesn't exist. You're looking for the Jesus you knew as a good teacher, as a divine healer, as a provider and protector. But I'm so much more.”

- ❖ But let's not miss the point. **She's us. We're Mary.** Maybe you're sincerely seeking answers, searching for God. For some of you it's been a long process. You're still looking for the truth. And it's been a hard process. You've shed tears along the way.
 - ▶ And you might be tempted to comfort yourself with the thought that if I just keep searching, I'll eventually find God. But don't you see? The Jesus we're typically searching for doesn't exist. **And if the real Jesus just stood back, if he remained at a distance, if his attitude is to wait until we figured it out for ourselves, then we'll be searching forever.** No one seeks and finds Jesus. No, it's Jesus who graciously breaks in, who mercifully interrupts, and finds us.

- ❖ Look at v16. He says one word. He calls her name, “*Mary.*” And suddenly, the blinders are removed. The scales fall off her eyes. Light shines into darkness. And she can see for the very first time. **This is a beautiful picture of conversion, of salvation by grace.**
 - ▶ Mary would've continued searching aimlessly, looking for a Jesus that doesn't exist. And all of her efforts, all of her sincerity, all of her tears would've amounted to nothing. Only until Jesus interrupts and calls your name.

- ❖ It reminds me of what Jesus said earlier in chapter 10, where he calls himself the Good Shepherd who lovingly watches over his sheep. He says, “*The sheep hear his voice, and he calls him own sheep by name and leads them out.*” (10:3) **You're saved, you're converted, you finally see Jesus for who he really is – when he calls your name.**
 - ▶ The Good Shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep. He has died in your place. He has paid your debt. He has become a curse for you. **He's literally gone to hell and back to rescue you. And when he finds you, he calls your name.** If you're a seeker, perhaps he's calling your name. Weep no more, friend. Your Savior is alive. He is risen. He is risen indeed.

An Earth-Shattering Event to be Proclaimed

- ❖ This is what I mean by the Resurrection being a personal event to experience. If you're granted this experience, if the Lord calls you by name, nothing will ever be the same. Like Mary, you'll be changed from mourner to missionary, from griever to goer. This leads to our last point: **The Resurrection is an earth-shattering event that needs to be proclaimed.**

- ❖ Read with me again starting in v17, “*17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for 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." ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" – and that he had said these things to her."

- ❖ Some translations have Jesus saying, "Do not touch me." But a better translation is, "Do not cling to me" or better yet, "Do not continue clinging to me." He's referring to something in progress. Most likely she's fallen at Jesus' feet, and she's clinging to his legs. She's lost him once. She doesn't want to lose him again. She's going to hold tight to him this time.
 - ▶ But Jesus said you need to let me go. For a couple of reasons. **For one, because his relationship to his disciples has to change.** They can't expect him to return things back to normal. To the way it was. Traveling together from village to village, preaching, teaching, healing. No, not anymore. Things are in transition.
 - Jesus says he has yet to ascend to the Father. That's his plan. "Mary don't cling to me any longer. My plan is to ascend up to my Father and then I'll send down my Spirit, the Helper." **From now on, his permanent, abiding presence with his disciples will no longer be in the flesh but in the Spirit.**

- ❖ That's why Mary needs to let go. Not just of his legs. **But to let go of her expectations, of her desire for things to go back to normal, for her relationship with Christ to go back to what's familiar.** She doesn't get it right now but it's actually to her advantage (our advantage) that he goes away. Those are Jesus' own words in chapter 16:7, "*Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.*"
 - ▶ It's like he's saying, "You think having God by your side is your idea of heaven on earth? You don't know the plans I've got. You don't know what I have in store for you. *God by your side* is great. But *God in you* through the Holy Spirit is far better."

- ❖ **Now there's one more reason why Mary needs to let go: She has a job to do, a mission to complete.** If you think about it, she's the very first Christian evangelist. She's the first person ever to preach the gospel of Jesus as the Christ who lived and died and rose again for us and for our salvation. She believes in the Resurrection. She experiences the Resurrection. And now she's different. **She's gone from mourner to missionary, from griever to goer.** She's no longer content with her private relationship with her own personal Jesus. **She stopped clinging to him, and she's started telling people about him instead.**

- ❖ "Do not cling to me." Those are words we need to internalize. **We Christians can cling so tightly to our comfortable Jesus.** To a Jesus whose only request is that we gather once a week to sing some songs to him and listen to a sermon. That's the Jesus we're used to – the safe and familiar Jesus found inside the walls of a comfortable church.
 - ▶ We've got to let go of that. We can't cling so tightly to our private relationship with Jesus. **The Resurrection is too eucatastrophic for nothing to change in our lives.** Our Savior has called out each of us by name – that we might go out and proclaim the good news. That the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed.