

## The Eucatastrophe of His Story

John 20:1-18

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 5, 2026

### Introduction

#### ❖ When was the last time you had a good cry while watching a movie or reading a book?

I'm not sure if it counts as a cry, but not that long ago, I was getting teary eyed while reading to Maisie from the *Little Pilgrim's Big Journey*. It was in the third book during the final battle when it appears that Beelzebub and Apollyon had gotten the upper hand. Their forces have surrounded the remaining little pilgrims, and they're about to strike a final blow. One of the pilgrims says in despair, "It looks like this is the end. We're all alone now."

- But then you turn the page, and a bright shining figure is there, coming with the clouds, riding on a white steed, with a sword in his hand, and an army behind him, shouting, "You are not alone. You were never alone!" And I'm telling you—even though I have read and re-read that page multiple times by constant request from my five-year-old—I **can't get through it without something tugging at my heart strings**. It's the same words and same pictures. But it just hits me every time.

#### ❖ Good stories have a way of doing that. Touching emotions. 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, something unforeseen, something unbelievable, something momentous occurs and everything is turned around for the better. It suddenly all works out and concludes with a happy ending.**

- There's a word for that. It's called a **eucatastrophe**. That's a term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien. 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 a eucatastrophe is a good catastrophe.** It's 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.

#### ❖ Tolkien was a master of the eucatastrophe. He would lead his stories to a very dark place where it looks like the heroes will be soundly defeated. It appears as if evil will triumph and darkness will reign. But then suddenly the eagles come out of nowhere and save the day. He includes quite a few these sudden, unforeseen turns in his stories. The greatest one being the final destruction of the Ring in a totally unexpected fashion.

- But while he might have invented the term, Tolkien would insist that he—like all good storytellers—never invents the eucatastrophe. He simply remembers it. **Because all eucatastrophes are simply echos of the one grand Eucatastrophe of human history.** He said that the Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of human history. And the Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the gospel story.

#### ❖ Think about it. By that point in the Gospel, arriving on Calvary, staring up at the cross, everything looks grim. The Messiah is battered and bruised. Hanging on a cross. Evil has won. Darkness has overcome. Hope has been extinguished. The devil and his demons laugh and celebrate. **But then, early Sunday morning, while it was still dark—a eucatastrophe!** The stone is rolled away, and suddenly, out of nowhere, everything changes for the better.

- ❖ The point is that all those good stories out there where heroes go up against impossible odds and face insurmountable obstacles and enemies—the reason you love them so much, the reason they move you so much—is because **all eucatastrophic stories are based on a Prime Story that already took place in human history.**
  - The next time you read or watch a story with a eucatastrophic ending—and you’re bursting with joy or maybe shedding a happy tear—remind yourself that you love these stories so much because something like this really did happen. **There really was a noble Hero who slew a dragon, who rescued a Bride, who made the ultimate sacrifice of laying down his life for others.**
    - And something like this will happen again. **One day, we’ll look to the East and there will be a Mighty King, coming with the clouds, riding on a white steed, appearing on the horizon at just the right time.** He will trample on death, right every wrong, and make every sad thing come untrue. You feel this kind of story in your bones *because* the Resurrection happened. That’s why you feel that joy and why you shed those happy tears.
  
- ❖ **Now, look, I’m not going to assume that everyone here believes in the Resurrection.** Perhaps you don’t normally go to church, but you’ve been invited this morning to witness someone’s baptism. We acknowledge your presence and your doubts about the Resurrection. You find it hard to believe that someone could rise from the dead, and that so many people here treat that claim as a matter of fact.
  - If you don’t believe in the Resurrection, I imagine you’ll encounter an eucatastrophic ending in a book or film, and it’ll make you happy like the rest of us. **But I wonder, if mixed with that, there’s a tinge of skepticism or sadness there.** Perhaps you walk away thinking, “That’s a happy ending. But too bad life’s not like that. Too bad things don’t always work out that way. I sure wish that were true.”
    - But don’t you see? **The fact that you enjoy it—that you long for such eucatastrophic endings—suggests that the Resurrection is true.** At least it means that deep down you want it to be true.
  
- ❖ Friends, on this Easter morning, I want to show you three true 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 a public event to be proclaimed.

### **A Historical Event to Be Believed**

- ❖ **The first thing to stress from our passage is how it points to the reliability of the Resurrection as an event that took place in human history.** The Apostle John tells us at the end of chapter 19 that Joseph of Arimathea was given possession of Jesus’s body. And with the help of Nicodemus (a Pharisee that Jesus encountered back in chapter 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 Sepulcher** is built on top of it. You can visit that church and observe centuries of tradition. **Now some are going to conclude that it's simply that—all this talk of Jesus rising from the grave is just tradition.** Not historical fact.
- ❖ But I see evidence in this text that leads me to believe in the Resurrection as a real event that took place in history. **First, notice how Mary—when confronted with the empty tomb—how her gut reaction was to blame it on grave robbers.** Even though Jesus predicted his Resurrection many times earlier in the Gospel accounts, his disciples still 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 at the tomb, the first thing they notice are the linen clothes lying there. Signaling 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 buried treasure. 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 you the impression that whatever happen here wasn't 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 bothered to neatly fold the face cloth.
  - **So you can't explain away the empty tomb with a robbery.** And let's be clear, the tomb certainly was empty. If the disciples had concocted these claims of seeing the Risen Lord, their rumors could've easily been squashed by producing the body. The early Jewish and Roman authorities had plenty of incentive to disprove their resurrection claims since this Christian movement was becoming a threat to social order. **But they didn't exhume 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; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”*
  - That's interesting. It says the disciples believed, and yet it says they still did not understand that Scripture predicted the Resurrection. Which is important when defending its historical veracity. **It means their belief was based on their eyewitness encounter and not on their preconceived ideas about a resurrection.**
    - They weren't just making up a story of a Resurrection to fit their existing constructs and beliefs that the Messiah would resurrect. They weren't looking for signs of a Resurrection. Because they weren't expecting one.
- ❖ But now John can't deny the overwhelming evidence staring him in the face. Yes, it confronted his belief system. It blew up his plausibility structures. **But instead of stubbornly denying the plain evidence before him, John saw and believed.**

- ❖ And it's worth noting that what he actually saw, at this point, was *not* the bodily Resurrected Lord. This was not a resurrection sighting. That comes next. All John saw was an empty tomb and some grave clothes. He didn't see the Risen Jesus.
  - Which puts us in his shoes. We too have not seen the Risen Lord with our own eyes. **And yet, according to v8, even without a chance to see the Risen Christ with your own eyes, you can still have faith to believe he's alive.**
  
- ❖ Now I realize that, later on in chapter 20, another disciple named **Thomas** insists that he'll never believe until he can see and touch Jesus for himself. Now if that's the only way we can ever truly believe, then we're out of luck. Because besides the early disciples, no one else in Church history experienced a Resurrection sighting of the bodily Risen Lord.
  - But John's point is that you don't need it. **You can have genuine faith and confidence that Jesus is alive without physically seeing 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.
  - **Friends, you're not at a disadvantage to these 1st-century disciples because you live in the 21st-century.** Because you didn't get a chance to see the Risen Lord 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's account of the Resurrection 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's solid evidence for us to make a rational conclusion that the tomb was empty and that Jesus is alive. The Resurrection is a historical event to be believed. But there's more. Here's our 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's unjust trial and brutally bloody crucifixion. Now she's grieving over her master's body being desecrated by grave robbers. Or so she thinks.
  
- ❖ It says in v12 that when she peered in the tomb, she sees two angels dressed in white. And they ask her a simple question, "*Why are you weeping?*" And those words probably cut her to the heart. It was hard to answer. On one hand, she's mourning the loss of a loved one. She misses her master. She's heart-broken that she'll no longer enjoy his presence and company.

- ❖ **But on a deeper level, it's very possible that Mary is crying over a sense of disillusionment, betrayal, or 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's the one who 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 still seeking. Notice the next question she's asked in v15, "*Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?*" Now Mary doesn't realize yet who's doing the asking. She just senses someone else is in the garden. **She assumes, at this early morning hour, it must be the gardener. So she asks him about the body.** "*Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*" She's searching for answers. She's seeking hard, even to the point of tears.
  - **But the problem is that she's seeking for a Jesus that doesn't exist.** What I'm saying is that her concept of the Messiah is still incomplete. Which explains why she didn't recognize him, even as he's standing right in front of her.
    - 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? I don't think the Jesus you're seeking exists. The Jesus you're looking for is far too small. You're looking for the man you knew as a good teacher, as a merciful healer, as a gracious provider and protector. But he's so much more."
  
- ❖ Mary is seeking for a Jesus that doesn't exist. But I wouldn't be too hard on her. **Because she's us. We're Mary in this story.** Maybe some of you are still seeking the truth. You're searching for God. Maybe it's been a long process. And a hard process. Maybe you've shed some tears along the way.
  - **But be careful that you're not searching for a Savior out there that doesn't exist.** The Jesus you're looking for might check all *your* boxes and fit all *your* expectations. **But could that just be the Jesus of your imagination?** And not the Jesus of human history who lived, died, and rose again for our sins and our salvation?
  
- ❖ **There are lots of people searching for a Savior, but sadly so many are seeking for one that merely exists inside their heads.** If we're left to ourselves, we'll be searching aimlessly forever. But thankfully, Jesus is good and gracious. And he takes the initiative. To mercifully interrupt and interject in our lives.
  - That's what he does in v16. He says one word. He calls her name. He says, "*Mary.*" And suddenly, her blinders are ripped off. Scales fall off her eyes. Light shines into her darkness. And Mary can see for the very first time. She sees Jesus for who he really is. **This, my friends, is a beautiful picture of conversion.**

- ❖ If not for that Mary would've continued searching aimlessly, looking for a Jesus that doesn't exist. And all of her efforts, all of her tears, would've amounted to nothing. **Nothing changes until Jesus interrupts and calls your name.**
  - That reminds me of what Jesus said earlier in John 10, when he called himself the Good Shepherd who 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 find the Jesus who actually exists—when he calls your name.**
    - The Good Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep. He became a curse for you. **He literally went to hell and back to rescue you. And when he finds you, he calls your name.** Perhaps he's calling your name this morning. Weep no more, friend. Your Savior is alive. He is risen. He is risen indeed.

### **A Public Event to Be Proclaimed**

- ❖ This is what I mean by the Resurrection being a personal event that you need to experience. If you do, 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 a public event that needs to be proclaimed.**
  - Start in v17, *"<sup>17</sup>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.'"* <sup>18</sup>*Mary 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 Mary has fallen at Jesus's feet, and she's clinging on 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. **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. No more traveling together from village to village, preaching and healing, learning at his feet. Not anymore. Things are in transition.
- ❖ Jesus says he has yet to ascend to the Father. "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, helping presence with his disciples won't 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; of her longing for her relationship with Jesus to go back to the way it was.** She doesn't get it right now, but it's actually to her advantage (to *our* advantage) that he goes away. Those are his own words in John 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 heaven on earth? Mary, you don't know the plans I've got in store for you and all disciples. **God by your side is great. But God in you through the Holy Spirit is far better.** Wait for him. He's coming."
- ❖ 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 first Christian evangelist. She's the first person to preach the Resurrection—the good news that Jesus died and rose again.
  - She believes in the Resurrection. She's experienced the Resurrection. And now she's sent to proclaim it. **She's gone from mourner to missionary—from griever to goer.** No longer content with her private relationship with her own personal Jesus. **She stopped clinging to him, and she started telling people about him instead.**
- ❖ "*Do not cling to me.*" Those are words for all of us to internalize. **We can cling so tightly to our comfortable Jesus.** To a Jesus whose only request is for us to gather once a week to sing some songs to him and listen to a sermon. That's the Jesus we're used to—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 a private relationship with a personal Jesus. **The Resurrection is too eucatastrophic for nothing to significantly change in our lives.** For things to go back to normal. How can it when our Savior has called each of us by name. To go and proclaim the good news. To tell the world that the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!