

The Eucatastophe

2025 04 05 Toronto United Mennonite Church

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18 - [The Resurrection and First Appearance](#)

It is worth noting that the Resurrection moment is a burst of tears and shock, confusion and running. It is not so much angelic trumpets and joy and victory as we might think. The happy feelings will follow, and carefully crafted words of praise and thanksgiving to God for this great culmination, but today, now, there are no words. There are only blurred images and the persistence of dread amid glimmers of hope, and rare daring leaps of wild imagination. Tears and shock, confusion and running. And your name, spoken well, making well.

This moment is the eucatastophe, to borrow a term from professor Tolkien. The eucatastophe is the surprise good ending. When everything is unravelling, the eucatastophe is the sudden turn away from threat and disaster into positive resolution. In the eucatastophe, the corrupting artifact is destroyed by the very villains who covet it. The curious wanderer saves the kingdom from its curse by following their own romantic nature. The misunderstanding becomes clear just in time. The angel voice prevents a murder. The lion lies down with the lamb.

We do not get a lot of these moments in our lives. Most of the time, if things go well it is because of good planning, adequate resources, effective relationships, and the advantages inherited fairly or unfairly. Most of the time when our plans turn out well, luck is a factor. Luck is a word that means 'all the factors I couldn't take into account'. We call it good luck when those factors produce an outcome we wanted. For things to go well, you don't always need good luck, but you do need an absence of bad luck.

Things don't always go well. Things in Mary's life had not always gone well. This was not the first time that she had cried. We know very little about Mary

Magdalene, and if you have ever heard about her, you have almost certainly heard some stories that were made up long after her life, to make her seem less important, or more flawed, or more holy, or for some other agenda. But we can say that she knew distress and pain. The Bible does not tell her story, only notes that she had suffered something catastrophic, and that Jesus healed her, delivered her into freedom, and that she followed him. She followed him as a charismatic teacher roaming the countryside, and as a fiery downtown preacher, and eventually as a political prisoner. With a small group she followed him as he carried the cross to the place of execution, through a much larger crowd excited to see him die. And she follows Jesus even after his death, looking for his body, to wash it and wrap it and bury it, because that is what you do with the bodies of those you love.

Mary knew about love and loss and tears. She had cried before. Just like all of us, just like Jesus, who also cried beside the tomb of a beloved friend. We heard that story at the beginning of Lent, how Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus, and comforted a different Mary along with Martha, sisters of the dead man. And in the way that John tells the story, what happened next led to the tears we hear today. Jesus brings Lazarus back from death into life. This sign is so powerful that it finally seals his fate. Last week we heard how Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, and the masses welcomed him as the miracle-worker and the coming king, and the powerful put their plans into motion to slander him, isolate him, and kill him. In raising Lazarus from the dead, and travelling to Jerusalem, Jesus made his moment. He brought confrontation to the centre of power, and power killed him.

What went wrong? We might consider it poor planning, inadequate resources, trusting the wrong people, or just bad luck - the conspiracy of the factors unaccounted for. On Friday I heard the question I am appropriately asked each Holy Week. Why do we call it Good Friday? We do not worship pain. We do not believe that suffering is greater than grace. We believe that life is a deeper truth

than death. The eucatastrophe that emerges with angelic visitors, dislodged stones, and a discarded shroud points not to problems in the plan, but to God's grace as the final word. This Resurrection is the beginning of true life.

The eucatastrophe is not about good luck outweighing bad luck, or even good planning succeeding against the intentions of wicked people and their programs of banal cruelty which surely exist to this day. The eucatastrophe is about grace, which is success when you don't deserve it, and life when you cannot earn it. This grace is the nature and name of the God revealed in Jesus. We find grace when we are bold enough or tired enough to break down and cry. Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Grace finds us when we are willing to go into the place of death and remain there, praying, listening. Blessed are those who are hungry for righteousness, for justice, and for food - they shall be satisfied. We are in Grace when we know our frailties and failings and also know that we are loved, and we are free to try again. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

We can see grace like the fingerprint of our Creator when we look at the hard things of this world, when we go to the places of death and power. By grace we can believe, even when we do not understand.

Over the last forty days we have prepared to hear these stories. The season of Lent is a time of prayer, attention, and openness. It has also been a time when the merchants of death have celebrated another war, the killing of civilians, the opportunities for profit. Members of this congregation joined the call for Canadian companies no longer to sell weapons to perpetrators of war crimes, a call that was not just ignored, but rejected by the government and opposition alike. We have been dwelling in dissonance these forty days - sharing a world of infinite love and creativity, but held captive by those with money, weapons, and thrones, those with no creativity, no vision, and no mercy.

So it means something to choose to walk the path of Jesus, following the one who walked towards death, who looked upon suffering and confusion and was moved with compassion, who, having loved his own who were in the world, now loved them to the last. He took a towel, and knelt, and washed our feet, and he said for us to do this for one another.

What we do in a moment of crisis, in a world of crisis, is whatever it is that we have prepared ourselves to do. If we have not prepared, we do nothing, or sometimes do something worse than nothing. If we have prepared for violence, we lash out. If we have prepared to flee, we turn away. The powerful in this world make their plans well in advance, and if they cannot wait for a crisis to put them into effect, they make the crisis.

Jesus asked us to prepare ourselves to be his disciples. He taught us how to pray. He taught us to leave behind the things we didn't need. He showed us how to be a good and gracious visitor in another person's home, how to cross to the other side, hear a different story, and bless the people who we once thought of as enemies. He instituted the sign of communion, inviting us to accept his broken body and his spilled blood not as a curse, but as a source of strength and life, as a new and sign and binding promise of God's love for us. He showed us that we have to wash one another's feet, that there was nothing shameful in the work of a servant, and that we were not to have masters any more. He taught the men how to listen and how to serve huge crowds with food, and how to welcome the messy chaos of children, and he taught the women how to take up space, and lead, and rest.

This is how we dwell in dissonance, by being the dissonance. We refuse to be confirmed to the patterns of this world, to lies or violence, or dissipation, or nihilism. We have to be the disharmony in the song of war, the wrench in the

machinery. We have to join with the company of all those who reach out the hand of friendship, regardless of religion, inclusive of difference, delighting in dreaming God's dream.

This requires us to practice and prepare, continuing what we were taught and always attentive to new lessons. I have said that this is preparation for crisis, giving us strength and wisdom and community, but it is also, always, and ultimately, preparation for eucatastrophe. It is the practice of resurrection. It is the presence of the life-giving Spirit. Mary was prepared to venture out alone into the night. The others were prepared to believe her, and come at her word, they were all prepared to run towards the place of death and look into the tomb. Mary was also prepared to wait. She waits at the tomb and weeps, and hears, and speaks, and reaches, and refrains. And she is commissioned to preach the good news to the disciples and the whole world, where to this day she is honoured as the apostle to the apostles. She was prepared for this, even if she didn't know it. She was ready to witness the sudden turn towards goodness.

Through our preparation we are open to eucatastrophe. We practice resurrection, we believe and trust, and commit, and rest. So in this way, listen for the voice that speaks your name, that makes all things well, all things new. Listen, and believe.