



A SAVIOR APPEARS: TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

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It's a challenge to engage familiar concepts with fresh enthusiasm, for an announcement to be astonishing and recognizable at the same time. The message of Easter is a good example. No one in this room, I expect, is hearing the phrase "Christ is risen" for the first time. And yet we must not let familiarity keep us from experiencing the wonder of this great truth.

One way to hear the familiar with freshness is to use new language. J.R.R. Tolkien invented a word—"eucatastrophe"—in an article he penned on how to write a good story. The letters "eu" form a prefix that means good. A eulogy is a good word or speech. Euphoria is a good feeling. But Tolkien took this 'good' prefix and, surprisingly, attached it to the word catastrophe. Catastrophe can be defined as "a momentous, tragic occurrence ranging from extreme misfortune to utter overthrow or ruin". When a shattering event is turned on its head and occasions joy instead of sorrow it is a eucatastrophe. In Tolkien's great epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, the joyful overthrow occurred when the 'one ring' was melted in the fires of Mt. Doom and the power of the Dark Lord evaporated.

J.R.R. Tolkien was a Christian and he also used his invented word in writing about Easter. For him, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is "eucatastrophe" for the human story. It is the extraordinary, unexpected, too-good-to-be-true, overturning of everything for the good.

Since we will end our service today by baptizing new believers in our fellowship, we will use some of the New Testament baptism texts to try to see the glorious 'shattering' of Easter with fresh eyes. But, because the challenges of skeptics are almost as common as the joy of believers at Easter time, let us briefly address some familiar objections.

Challenges to the accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection usually take one of two forms. The first is to declare that the facts are wrong. The other is to say that the literature itself is not reliable—that the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were created decades after Jesus' death and were intended as 'spiritual encouragements' not as a telling of history.

Lets consider the first objection. What alternative to the miracle of the resurrection makes better sense than the accounts we have in the gospels? Consider some familiar ones: a) The body of the Lord was stolen from the tomb by his disciples. b) Jesus only appeared to die on the cross and later was revived—accounting for his 'supposed resurrection appearances'. c) The women, in the darkness before daybreak, went to the wrong tomb.

But these notions and others like them don't hold up because of what we know occurred just a few weeks later. The very disciples who were cowardly, confused, and disoriented by Jesus' death appear transformed in Jerusalem at Pentecost. They are fervent, with unshakable purpose, speaking of what they have seen, and insisting that others take it seriously. They are willing to be impoverished, persecuted, and even killed for the sake of the gospel. Jesus' enemies could not produce his body as evidence against this new sect and it is not reasonable to imagine that Jesus' followers were transformed by a made-up experience of supposed resurrection. The earliest disciples believed what they declared—that Jesus had died on a cross and been raised again. There was no simple mistake that could be overturned on further examination. There was no deliberate hoax.

The second type of objection—declaring that the gospels were written, not as history, but as an inspiring fable generated decades later also fails. There is no beautiful, uplifting story. We don't look back on the first believers on the first Easter as good examples to emulate. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John describe awkward scenes, odd facts, and disbelief. The witnesses to resurrection encountered the risen Christ as an incomprehensible surprise.

The disciples were expecting nothing good and in fact displayed recognizable stages of grief on the first Easter morning: withdrawal, denial, and depression. When the grave was reported to be empty, their thoughts turned first to ghosts and grave robbers. The leading men in the community were made to look especially clueless by the testimony of women. Further, the physical evidence is mentioned in stark terms without elaboration. A stone is moved. The tomb is empty. Linen burial cloths

were left behind. Jesus' resurrection was an astounding "eucatastrophe"—which required his explanation before anyone grasped the truth.

Consider Jesus' appearance in resurrection—a guy with scars who eats fish and can't easily be distinguished from a gardener. A real human body that passes through walls and travels effortlessly from one place to another. He is recognizable as himself but profoundly changed as well, animated by a form of life that will never again be subject to death. Readers are shaken rather than inspired by these accounts.

Luke 24:45-49:

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Jesus opened their eyes to see that his sacrifice was the plan of God all along. Further, he says that believers are to be given God's power as proclaimers, clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit. None of this reads as an ennobling encouragement to inner illumination, or as a call to better group dynamics.

The resurrection was eucatastrophe on the first Easter and despite today's skeptics restating old objections (see Matthew 28:11-15) it remains so today. Our intention now is to encounter this news afresh as we consider Christian baptism, a reenactment of Jesus death, burial, and resurrection.

Romans 6:2b-4:

^{2b}We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Baptism retells Jesus' experience. It declares that a

believer is united with Christ in his death and burial (descent into the water) and resurrection (being raised up again). Specifically, we 'have died to sin' and 'may live a new life'. Once we were powerless to turn from sin—now the power that raised Jesus from the grave can cancel dark memories, and set us free from strong weaknesses. We can get off the treadmill of fake competence and inadequate quick fixes.

I recently saw a four year old pour bubble stuff on a dog. She was blowing bubbles in the backyard, assumed no one was paying attention and at one point poured about half a bottle of her soapy solution on our dog.

When I walked over to ask about the situation her first response was denial, "There is no bubble stuff on the dog." Realizing that approach wouldn't work she tried another, "Maybe there is soap on the dog, but I didn't put it there." This didn't work either and she finally said, "We should talk about something else."

The pattern is familiar isn't it? She had done something that she knew was wrong, mistreating a dog she likes for no good reason. She could neither defend the behavior nor explain what had led her to do it. It can't be true. Lets change the subject. Our actions often baffle and embarrass us don't they?

Not long ago I had a conversation about binge drinking with a friend who is an alcoholic. He said, "I hate everything about it, and yet there always comes a day when I take the last step, cross the line, and get drunk. There's not a single bit of enjoyment left, though I once thought drinking was fun. I hate what it does to me. I hate what I've become. And yet I assume I will fail again." He wonders, with some hope, if resurrection and new life are possible for him.

Easter celebrations speak of more than ancient recollections. Jesus' resurrection is not just history's greatest moment. It is God's power, effecting new life for all who are united with Christ.

Lets consider a second text that speaks of baptism (and therefore resurrection).

Galatians 3:26-28:

²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile,

neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

New life in Christ leads to new community in Christ. And surely we inhabit a world that is desperate for community. We're surrounded by people who are stressed and transient—conditions that make significant human connection difficult. Virtual relationships can be achieved quickly but rarely go deep. Sometimes people band together in dismissal of individuals who are deemed different or inferior, but shared rejection of 'them' is no basis for the human nearness we long for.

But being 'clothed with Christ' unleashes resurrection power that destroys dividing walls. We are linked in loving relationships with people we would otherwise be distant from. Familiar barriers (gender, wealth, tribe, status, and more) are done away. 'You are all one in Christ Jesus'.

We have seen that union with Christ in resurrection means first that 'we have died to sin . . . and may live a new life'. Second, we are members of a new community, 'all are one in Christ Jesus'. A third text that speaks of our experience of union with Christ in resurrection is found in first 1 Corinthians 15.

1 Corinthians 15:21-26:

²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

We are placed into Christ and life-beyond-death for him becomes our destiny as well.

²³But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

United with Christ in his resurrection, we are certain to participate in his victory celebration when the world is made new. Enthroned as king, Christ will destroy sin and

evil, all that is vile and unholy, every work of cruelty, abuse, and injustice. 'The last enemy to be destroyed is death'.

Because our future is certain we can oppose injustice in the present, resisting the king's enemies before he wins the final battle.

I have a friend whose daughter lived with kidney failure. As she entered puberty the experience of long, painful dialysis treatments and the emotional costs of 'being different' led to emotional volatility, in particular angry outbursts against her father. The more he loved her, the more explosive she got.

Some months ago this girl got a transplant and before too long her world changed. She can now do things like swim in a swimming pool and ride on a roller coaster. She's gained confidence socially. And she began a new kind of dialogue with her father. Shared laughter and spontaneous gratitude replaced sullenness and angry tears. If a replacement kidney can achieve such transformation how much more can we look forward to our resurrection bodies?

'Eucatastrophe'! Christ is risen indeed. We are called to new life and new community in the present and to anticipate new selves in a new world when the battle is over. May God be praised.