

Eucatastrophe

A couple weeks ago my wife and I watched a Hollywood fairy-tale called *August Rush*. It tells the story of an orphaned boy parted from his family at birth, all through no fault of their own, and how music ultimately brings them together. Although set in NY City, featuring poverty, homelessness and the grit and noise of the city there's very little reality to the film. The final scene through the boy's incredible gift for music and his and his parent's persistence ultimately brings them together in a glorious fairy-tale ending. If you're emotional like me it's one of those movies that you want to have a whole box of Kleenex nearby as you watch it.

I woke up in the middle of the night (after watching the movie) thinking about fairytales. I thought of the prince insisting that the wretched little girl near the ashes be allowed to try on that glass slipper, and it fitting. I thought of another prince finding his way through the impenetrable thicket of thorns and kissing the lips of the sleeping Briar Rose. I thought of the Beast, who through love of Beauty is able to win her love and thus break the spell keeping him from his true human form. I thought about Frodo and Sam, the Hobbits in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy painfully working their way up Mt. Doom to destroy Sauron's ring of power.

I thought also about the Gospel accounts of witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Mary weeping at the tomb begging a man she supposed to be the gardener to tell her where Jesus' body was laid, turning away and then hearing a familiar voice call out her name. I thought of the unnamed *other disciple* who outraced Peter to the tomb, saw the linen burial shroud and the wrapping that had been around Jesus' head neatly folded up and placed to the side of the tomb and seeing, believed. I thought of Cleopas, perhaps with his wife, being joined on their way from Jerusalem to a little village called Emmaus by a stranger walking down the road. The stranger opened their minds to new possibilities in the scripture, but it was only when he broke the bread at the supper table that they recognized him as their risen, living Lord. I thought of Jesus appearing suddenly to the disciples in the Upper Room and breathing on them.

Wide awake by this time I thought also of JRR Tolkien's definition of the sudden turn in a fairy tale when catastrophe changes to a surprisingly happy ending. Tolkien's word for this is "*Eucatastrophe*," or literally a "*good catastrophe*." Tolkien believed that the Christian story had the same turn from catastrophe to sudden and surprising joy as we enjoy in a good fairy tale. And no matter how many times we hear a good fairy tale there's something that still catches in our throats as the eucatastrophic turn takes place. At this point I got out of bed and jotted my thoughts down on the computer. Then I was able to get back to sleep. But before I went back to bed I knew that my Easter sermon would be entitled "*Eucatastrophe*."

In what has become a famous essay on fairy tales Tolkien wrote,

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel, if any specially beautiful fairy-story were found to be 'primarily' true, it's narrative

*to be history, without thereby necessarily losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed. ...The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the 'turn' in a fairy-story gives; such joy has the very taste of primary truth. It looks forward (or backward...) to the Great Eucatastrophe. The Christian joy, the Gloria, is of the same kind, but it is preeminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. But this story is supreme, and it is true. Art has been verified. God is the Lord, of angels and of men – and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused. (Tolkien's 1947 essay, *On Fairy Stories*, ed. C.S. Lewis, *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, p. 84)*

Before we can begin to comprehend the literal truth of Jesus as Lord and Savior, the One who dies and rises from the dead in order that we might have life, we do well to comprehend the story first as story. It is a great, wonderful and powerful story. And more importantly it is *our story*. Gretchen Wolff Pritchard in her wonderful book, *Offering the Gospel to Children*, writes,

The Bible calls all of us to become as children and rejoice in the ending to the greatest, and the truest, fairy tale of them all. It is the story of each one of us, raised from obscurity and poverty and shame by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the mystical Lamb Who Was Slain – the story of how, through his love we will grow to maturity and be given in marriage, inherit the crown of life, and live happily ever after. (p. 24)

Let us reflect on that story.

In the beginning was the Word. John tells us, and the Word was the light of the world (bring out lit candle): a single light shining in the darkness. The Word became flesh – a living, breathing human being. Jesus shed God's light in the darkness of our world. He shed God's light on our brokenness and pain as he healed the blind, cast out evil from those who were possessed, and even raised the dead to life. He shed God's light on how to live, teaching us to love others as ourselves and to serve those in need. He shed light on God, inviting us into a loving relationship with God as our own Father in heaven. He shed light on our inner darkness, revealing that only his life and light can truly set us free from the power of darkness that holds us captive. Those who followed him – the 12 whom he called, along with many faithful women and those who were inspired by his words – came to believe that he was the light of the world, the long-promised Messiah. But all their hopes, their excitement and expectancy were shattered when he was arrested, tried, convicted and nailed to a tree. They witnessed his brutal execution and saw where he was laid in a tomb.

But the light that appeared to be extinguished had not been vanquished. God raised Jesus from the dead – not a resuscitated corpse brought back to life, but a whole new realm of existence. They could touch their risen Lord. They sat and ate with him. But he could also walk through a locked door and appear and disappear at will. He appeared to many of his friends and followers. But his ultimate home was no longer earth but heaven. He promised to remain as a living presence and life with his followers. He charged them to

celebrate his life and share it with all peoples and races and nations. Then he ascended to be with his Father in Heaven.

It's a wonderful story. It's a story of power and joy and wonder. But how is this story different from other stories of gods and legends and fairytales? The nature of a fairytale, while delightful to here, is that it is a story *too good to be true*. Why do we believe that this story is primarily true? There are two reasons. The first is that Jesus was fully human. He didn't just appear to be a human being. He wasn't the stuff of legend or make believe. His story doesn't begin with "*once upon a time...*" but rather with, *Mary had a baby boy*. The story tells where he was born, where he grew up, who his family members were and what he did. Jesus was a person like you and me.

The second reason that this story is different is that it is fully attested by many witnesses. There are so many odd and seemingly irrelevant details included in those first hand accounts, which give them credibility. It is Peter and John's discovery of the head garments rolled up and put neatly aside. It is Mary Magdeline's utter confusion. It is all that running back and forth. It is the disciples refusal at first to believe. It is Thomas' skepticism and need to touch him. It is the transformation that takes place in Jesus' rag tag band of followers, from fearful cowards who refuse to even acknowledge that they know him to fearless and joyful evangelists. And it is the countless millions who have found new life in Christ from 33 AD to this present day.

Fairy tales always celebrate their heroes and heroines. Evan Taylor, the 12 year-old boy who becomes *August Rush*, never doubts for a second that his parents are alive and looking for him. He has great faith. Cinderella's virtue and humility in the face of oppression and cruelty help her marry the Prince and live happily ever after. Heroic princes in many tales succeed in impossible tasks through their faithfulness and willingness to ask for help. Then, despite terrible betrayals, they are vindicated in the end because of their faithfulness.

Who are the heroes in the Gospel story? Mary Magdeline is certainly one. Unlike most of the male disciples hiding in fear, Mary stands by the cross and comes to the tomb early in the morning to anoint the body. Through her faithfulness she is the first one to meet her risen Lord and the first one to be able to share the joyous news, *he has risen from the dead!*

The unnamed disciple who races Peter to the tomb is another Gospel hero. We assume this disciple is John, this parish's namesake. But in a number of instances he is named simply as "*the disciple Jesus loved*" or "*the other disciple*." I believe the Gospel writer is both picturing John as disciple and using a literary device to have us place ourselves in the story. We identify with the disciple Jesus loved sitting next to him at the Last Supper, being told to take Jesus' mother Mary as his own mother and racing Peter to the empty tomb. He represents the ideal of discipleship.

But it is not only Jesus' faithful followers who are Gospel heroes, so also are his unfaithful followers. The disciples all fell asleep when Jesus invited them to stay awake

and pray with him. Peter denied that he even knew Jesus. Thomas doubted. Most of the other disciples hid out in the locked upper room for fear of their lives. But they too met the risen Lord and found new and true life in him. They too were filled with the Holy Spirit and boldly witnessed to the resurrection.

So, you and me. We are called to emulate those Christian heroes. We are called to stay and watch with Christ, to witness his crucifixion and come in faith to the empty tomb. We are invited to be the disciple that Jesus loves. Like the unfaithful disciples we are forgiven and invited despite our many failings to share in the abundance of his risen life. Like those disciples we are also given the power of the Holy Spirit to become witnesses of the resurrection and share his life wherever we go.

In the Gospel story we have the most wonderful story ever told. A *Eucatastrophe* is a *good catastrophe*; it is the turn in the story where the tragic becomes the means to redemption. Let us rejoice to hear anew this wonderful good news and let the Gospel story be not just another wonderful tale, but our tale, our story of transformed lives of broken hearts healed and renewed. And in the joy of Easter, may we come to live happily forever and ever through Jesus' triumph over death.