

The Winner

John 20:1-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This is truly the best Sunday of the year. And it is a joy to be able to celebrate the resurrection this morning.

Last night I attended an Easter Vigil service at St. Augustine's Anglican church. It was a beautiful service. Near the beginning, the cantor sang these words which I thought would be wonderful for us to hear this morning (I'll substitute the word "day" for "night" which we used yesterday):

This is the night [and the day] when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin and are sectored to grace and the holiness of life.

This is the day when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell and rose victorious from the grave.

How wonderful and beyond our knowing, O God, is your mercy and loving kindness to us, that to redeem a slave, you gave a Son.

How holy is this day, when wickedness is put to flight and sin is washed away.

It restores innocence to the fallen and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred and brings peace and concord.

How blessed is this day when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God.

I love that line: those in Christ are "sectored to grace." We are divided out, set apart, tasked with embodying the grace of God in the world. Beautiful.

One of the many interesting things about being a pastor is that people send you *all kinds* of things that you really should read, listen to, watch.

I could describe this as an “occupational hazard.” I could also describe it as a privilege and an opportunity.

To be sure, some recommendations are less welcome than others. 😊 But occasionally, I encounter podcasts or books or articles or songs or shows that I would not otherwise have been aware of—things that make think in new ways or force me to reckon with faith in different ways.

I have a friend who’s an airline pilot. He has a lot of time to kill in between flights in hotels and airport terminals, and he is a voracious consumer of media of all kinds. So he’ll often text me any or all the above.

He’s also a deep thinker—economics, philosophy, religion, politics, you name it. We have some interesting exchanges via text.

Anyway, a while back he introduced me to an economist from George Mason University named Tyler Cowen. Cowen is an economist by trade, but there doesn’t seem to be any domain of human inquiry that he is not only aware of but has read deeply on (it’s kind of annoying!).

This week, Tyler Cowen was the guest on a podcast that my friend also introduced me to. The conversation bounced around between topics from AI to minimum wage to foreign aid to travel habits and favourite films. It was hard to keep up.

And then, religion made an appearance. This is the part where I perk up.

The host asked Tyler Cowen (who describes himself as “not religious”) an interesting question: If you could start a new religion today, and it would have a wide subscribership, like millions of followers, it wouldn’t just be dismissed as a cult what would it be?

Here’s some of what Cowen said in response:

Well, can I say Christianity as my new religion?... I would stick with that... It's the religion, I think, that's done the best...

Christianity is a clear winner.

I paused on that sentence. I filed it away for future use. Perhaps Easter Sunday use ☺
Christianity is a clear winner.

The host pressed Cowen a bit on his positive assessment of Christianity:

What do you think about strict church theory then? I mean, like... you don't believe in God... nor do I, but you see a lot of value in Christianity. Can you sustain those good things without some level of literal belief?

Here's where Cowen the economist showed up:

I think you need the literal belief, or you get slow decay. But I don't think all churches should be strict. You need a mix. It's a bit like price discrimination, but quality discrimination. There should be easier options for people. So, you want a certain amount of what is sometimes called cafeteria Catholicism, because it keeps people attached in some way. And you want also stricter sects where people truly participate and produce all these local public goods.¹

It was fascinating to hear this non-religious economist try to get the right calibration of Christianity to optimize its performance in the world and achieve the most social good.

I left pondering two ideas during this week of weeks—where we celebrate and remember the events that gave birth to faith:

1. Christianity as a “clear winner”
2. The idea that “literal belief” (at least for some) is necessary to get the benefits of Christianity—but the implicit idea that the full-strength version isn't for everyone.

Easter Sunday seemed to me as good a day as any to poke around at those two ideas.

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¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/conversations-with-coleman/id1716338488?i=1000758181711>

Let's start with the idea of Christianity as a "winner."

Easter Sunday is indeed a day of victory, but when you zoom out and look at the whole story of Jesus, it would be easier to make the opposite case. If you were inventing a religion, Christianity would seem a losing proposition!

There is a ridiculous, unlikely quality to so much of what we as Christians claim.

Christmas—God-in-flesh, born in scandalous circumstances, of questionable parentage in a feed trough. Not exactly a winning beginning.

The Sermon on the Mount—Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn and weep, those who are mocked and persecuted. This is almost a celebration of losing!

A public ministry spent hanging out with losers—tax collectors and sinners and Gentiles—instead of religious elites, the culture makers, the powerful and influential.

Palm Sunday—the "triumphal entry" of a king... on a *donkey*... talking about peace... A winner would ride a war horse! You don't see many city squares around the world with statues involving donkeys!

Maundy Thursday—a master who washes feet... Who serves instead of demanding to be served. Who talks an awful lot about love—and love of the costliest kind.

Good Friday... a Messiah, executed like a common criminal, going out with hardly a whimper... A loser if ever there was one.

But now, **Easter Sunday**— a day of victory and triumph! This, surely, is where the winning begins.

And it is true. The empty tomb proclaims a glorious victory. Christ is the victor over sin and death and evil. This we proclaim with joy!

But even here, the story has some dissonance. As far as triumphant moments go, it's not an obvious one, at least for the first disciples, as we'll see.

There is an unexpected, surprising, disorienting quality to so much of what Jesus said and did throughout his life. And his death. And his back-to-life.

This week I read an article by Martin Shaw called “Why Easter is our Strangest Story.” He described the career of Jesus like this:

[A] dusty healer from Nazareth tipping over the tables of polite society. He outrages and blesses in seemingly equal measure. His story is profoundly odd: he is born into this world as a fugitive, is butchered as an outlaw and has the audacity to return.²

“Winner” is not the first word that comes to mind for any of this.

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Let’s shift to the second thing that struck me in an economist’s take on Christianity. The idea that a “certain level of literal belief” is necessary to optimize its performance.

Easter is indeed our strangest story because it claims something quite ridiculous: That a man everyone saw die publicly—butchered as an outlaw—was alive three days later. And that his life opens the door for eternal life for all and represents the very defeat of death itself.

Can we believe this literally? Is not this whole rising from the dead thing too much to ask of twenty-first century educated believers?

We should begin by reminding ourselves that it was an awful lot to ask of first century believers, as well!

It’s not as though resurrection was a common occurrence back then—as if first century people were uniquely naïve, expecting people to be popping out of their graves on a regular basis!

Each of the gospel accounts of the resurrection makes this plain. *Nobody* was expecting what happened to happen.

In Mark, the women’s reaction to the news that Jesus is risen is to flee, “trembling and bewildered... because they were afraid.”

² <https://unherd.com/2026/04/why-easter-is-our-strangest-story/>

Luke reports that the disciples refused to believe the women at first—“their words seemed to them like nonsense” (Luke 24:11)—and that two of them didn’t even recognize Jesus as he walked with them on the road to Emmaus.

Matthew’s account is probably the most triumphant of the bunch, but even here it says that some among the eleven disciples doubted, *even after seeing Jesus in the flesh*.

And in the gospel of John, where we have been dwelling throughout the season of Lent, confusion and chaos reigns.

Mary Magdalene sees the stone rolled away and rushes off to tell the disciples. Peter and “the other disciple” come rushing back and peer into the tomb, needing to see for themselves that the tomb is empty, not relying on the testimony of Mary.

They see the strips of linen lying neatly in the tomb. And, it says that the “other disciple” “saw and believed.”

But at this point, it seems that all he believed was that Mary wasn’t lying, that the tomb really *was* empty. Even when they see the strips of linen lying there, they still don’t have any clue that Jesus might have risen from the dead, as verse 9 makes plain:

They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

Even while staring at an empty tomb.

And Mary? Well, she returned with the disciples to the tomb. But rather than being full of joy or even perplexed wonder, she just stands there and weeps.

Hardly the response you might imagine if discovering an empty tomb were the eagerly anticipated good news of the defeat of death!

After reading the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, we could be forgiven for thinking that the first witnesses are confused, sluggish, even *reluctant* participants in God’s great moment of triumph over evil, sin, and death.

It’s not as though the people who had seen Jesus executed on a Roman cross were sitting on pins and needles until the third day thinking, “will he or won’t he?!”

Despite Jesus' predictions, *nobody expected this*. The stories simply do not read this way. They are full of confusion and fear and doubt at every turn.

The church of Jesus Christ was quite literally shocked into existence by the resurrection, by the stunned testimony of those first witnesses who arrived at an empty tomb expecting to honour a dead friend and departing with the surprise of their lives.

And once they got over the shock, they went out proclaiming a gospel that would span the globe and transform the world.

Many people try to deal with the strangeness of the literal claims of Easter by relegating it to the realm of metaphor—the newness of spring after a cold winter, the colour of flowers emerging from winter's grey, new possibilities, etc.

But no metaphor could have accomplished any of this.

Easter is the story of a loser becoming a winner.

It is the story of the Man of Sorrows, one who was despised, rejected, one from whom people hid their faces, one who had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him...

... becoming the firstborn of the new creation, the risen and exalted Lord of history.

Literally.

It is the story that subverts and upends all our categories about winning and losing.

Weakness is strength.

Peace is power.

Humility is authority.

Foolishness is wisdom.

Death is the path to life.

Jesus is the Winner. And this is how he wins.

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As I was leaving our Maundy Thursday service on Thursday night, I got a text from my airline pilot friend letting me know that U2 released a new album. We have both been fans of the lads from Ireland for a long time.

I listened to it on Good Friday as I was writing my Easter Sunday sermon. One song, called Scars is a reflection on loss and is saturated with imagery from Christ's crucifixion.

There was one line that couldn't help but stand out to me when I first heard in my headphones Good Friday morning, knowing that I was going to be talking about winners and losers today.

(Last night at the St. Augustine's service, the homily was peppered with references to Dante, George Herbert and John Donne. You get an economist and an aging rock star. 😊)

I'm the last of your loves
The loser the least
I'm the name on the form that demands your release.

Jesus, the loser, the least, is the winner.

He is the last of our loves, the only one who loves us to the other side of death.

He is the one whose death and resurrection demands our release from the captivity of sin and death.

And he speaks a personal word to each of us.

I've talked a lot this morning about how unlikely this Easter story was and is, about how even those first participants in the story had no clue what was really going on.

Eventually, though, they do begin to get it. It's interesting to notice when. And how.

When does Mary finally clue in that the gardener is Jesus? Not when they're having a conversation. Not even when she's looking right at him.

When he calls her by name.

That's when the scales fall from her eyes. This is when she sees the incredible truth.

At the end of it all, our Christian faith is not a theological system or a theory or a rational proof or even a mystical experience. It's certainly not an economic theory or a calculus for the optimization of social goods!

It is a personal call from one who knows us by name.

Earlier in John's gospel, Jesus says that the Good Shepherd **calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.** (John 10:3).

At the end of it all, the resurrection of Christ makes a personal claim on us. The one whose life is the defeat of death, speaks to us, calls us by name.

Mary. Phil. Claire. Karl. Linda. Kevin. Charity. Esther. Zachary.

Will you believe this ridiculous, foolish, magnificent story about a life and a death and a life-after-death that is big enough and strong enough and holy and hopeful enough to defeat death itself?

Will you accept my call to participate in this winning that looks like losing, trusting that this is how I am making all things new?

This is our God. The crucified king. The risen Lord of history. The good shepherd who calls his sheep by name.

The One who holds out grace for sinners, for the lawbreakers, for the hypocrites, for the literalists and the "cafeteria Catholics" and all the rest of us.

The Winner.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

