

## “Resurrection Ripples”

### Luke 24:1-12 (CEB)

*Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised. Remember what he told you while he was still in Galilee, that the Human One must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words. When they returned from the tomb, they reported all these things to the eleven and all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles. Their words struck the apostles as nonsense, and they didn't believe the women. But Peter ran to the tomb. When he bent over to look inside, he saw only the linen cloth. Then he returned home, wondering what had happened.*

If you were following the news about six weeks ago, then you may remember that there was a huge splash in the scientific community in mid-February when physicists announced that they had, for the first time ever, observed “gravitational waves.” These ripples in the very fabric of space-time were caused when two enormous black holes crashed into each other in cataclysmic fashion and sent repercussions hurtling outward through the universe. What scientists were able to measure provided confirmation of Albert Einstein’s theory of general relativity, hypothesized 100 years ago last year.

If your eyes are crossing just trying to think about “gravitational waves,” fear not, because I don’t know enough to say anything else about them. But whether you are on the cutting edge of theoretical physics or still back with Isaac Newton and the apple falling out of the tree, it comes to the same thing, which is this: we can’t see gravity. We know the force exists because of its effect on things we can see. Our feet stay on the ground. Our rear ends stay in our seats. Water flows downhill. When we drop a penny, it falls down to the floor, not up to the ceiling. When David Ortiz hits a towering pop fly on the infield or a huge home run over the Green Monster, the ball will eventually come back to earth.

We know gravity exists because we can see and feel its effects. But even with this newest breakthrough in astrophysics, gravity itself remains stubbornly invisible.

Two thousand years ago, of course, people didn't know about Newtonian physics or Einsteinian relativity. Gravity as we currently understand it is a much more modern idea. But I think it has something to teach us about the story we heard today.

Jesus was dead. They had called him Teacher, Savior, Messiah, Lord. They had thought he was the One who would change their fortunes, who would save them from the powers that be and set the world right, the way God intended. They had followed him for three years, traversing the Galilean countryside on foot. They had accompanied him through teachings and healings and feedings. They had witnessed the power of his boundary-breaking, order-upsetting, love-spreading message.

And then they had arrived in Jerusalem. They had seen Jesus betrayed by one of their closest friends. They had seen the authorities put him up for a sham trial. They had heard the crowds condemn him. They had seen him nailed to the cross. They had witnessed his last words and his final breaths. They had watched as his lifeless body was taken down, wrapped in a linen sheet, and placed in a tomb. They had observed the enormous stone that was rolled across the entrance.

They had rested on the sabbath day, according to the commandments. And then, when the sabbath was over, they had gone back to the graveyard. Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women had prepared ointments and fragrant spices to anoint his body, according to the custom of the day when grieving someone beloved.

They expected to find the tomb much as they had left it—but when they arrived, the first light of early dawn revealed a different scene altogether. That enormous stone was rolled away. And when they tiptoed to the opening and peered inside, they saw that the tomb was empty, save for a pile of discarded linen in the corner.

And then two men appeared, dressed in dazzling robes, and said, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised.” The women were understandably terrified. None of this was as it was supposed to be. They couldn't see what had happened, and all they had was a second-hand story from those men in white telling them that Jesus was not dead, but alive.

We don't know how long they stayed there. The gospel doesn't record any additional conversation. But sooner or later, they returned to report what they had seen to the apostles. And those eleven, who knew just as well as the women did that dead bodies stay dead, replied, “Nonsense.” (Actually, the Greek word used here is *leros*, which is the root of our word *delirious*. The disciples were calling the story crazy, addled rantings. Or, to put it more colloquially, they were comparing it to the natural fertilizer a dairy farmer might use on his fields...)

The apostles had not seen what had happened. The women had seen the effects, but the disciples hadn't even seen that with their own eyes. All they had was a third-hand story, and they were not buying it—they were calling B.S.

In some way, we are in the same situation. We are not getting this story first-hand. Not even second- or third-hand, but centuries later, from sources that have been edited and revised over the years until even the foremost biblical scholars can't be entirely sure what is naked fact and what is embellishment to make a point.

You all are reasonable, intelligent people, so I will not insult you by suggesting that the Easter story is obviously credible, easily understandable, clearly true. You cannot see it with your own eyes. No one, not even those women who first witnessed the empty tomb, has seen the moment of resurrection itself.

And yet, every year at Easter, we continue to tell the story. You continue to come to church. We may not have seen it happen first-hand, but we can feel a magnetic power and a compelling truth in it yet, and we can see its effects rippling out through the world.

We see it when Peter—the disciple who was with Jesus on the night of his mocked-up trial, the one who, when asked if he knew Jesus, denied thrice over that he had ever met the man—Peter, that spineless one whose courage failed him the moment the going got tough, became the Rock on which the church was built.

We see it when Thomas—the disciple who doubted, even when his friends were at last convinced that Jesus was yet alive—Thomas, that faithless one who insisted that he would not, could not, believe—Thomas became an apostle who traveled to India and South Asia and founded a community of Christians there whose descendants now number more than four million.

We see it in the indelible images from the Civil Rights movement in the American South—Martin Luther King, Jr., and his colleagues, facing down fire hoses and billy clubs and attack dogs, with courage and dignity far beyond what ordinary human strength could bear.

We see it in the Orthodox Archbishop Yohanna Ibrahim of Aleppo, Syria, who was abducted by ISIS three years ago after he sought the release of a kidnapped priest and published a manuscript called “Accepting the Other,” which called for understanding and peaceful coexistence among people of various faiths, with compassion beyond what ordinary human kindness could sustain.

We see it in Charleston, South Carolina, at Emanuel AME Church, where the Rev. Betty Deas Clark was recently installed as the new pastor, just months after her predecessor and eight others were shot to death by a white supremacist after they welcomed him to join them for Bible study. Rev. Clark's first sermon focused on hope—hope beyond what ordinary human hearts could muster.

We see it every Monday in our downstairs church hall, where people who are housed and people who are homeless, people who are sick and people who are well, people who are hungry and people who are well-fed, people who are happy and people who are lonely, people of all shapes and sizes, ages and abilities, come together for lunch, while volunteers cheerfully cook and scrub pots in the kitchen for hours, and the whole thing is infused with a spirit of joy—joy beyond what ordinary human charity could generate.

And surely you have seen it in your own life, too. In a moment when all seemed lost—when the doctor said the cancer had spread, when the divorce papers came in the mail, when you thought the addiction was going to win, when it felt like the depression would never lift, when it seemed like the forces of violence and despair had triumphed—some power beyond your own kept your heart beating, your lungs breathing, your feet moving forward one step at a time, when by all rights it all should have ceased. Until one day you discovered that you were not alone, but were moving along that rough and rocky road in the midst of a great cloud of witnesses, and together you would make it through the valley of the shadow and out the other side.

No one has ever seen the moment of resurrection itself. It happened at night, in the silent darkness of a graveyard. All we have is the second-hand, third-hand, thousandth-hand story—that, and the visible ripples, the gravitational waves, the resurrection life that is yet in our midst, and that will, if we let it, fill our lives and our world with courage and dignity and compassion and hope and joy, until our hearts and our minds and our souls and our strength, our words and our actions and our very lives themselves proclaim: *Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*