

The Dawn That Defied Caesar (Luke 24:1-12)

You ever walk into a funeral home and catch that smell? Not just the floral overload of lilies and roses. I'm talking about the other scent—that sharp tang that clings beneath the surface. The smell of endings. Of hope curling up into itself like burnt paper. That was the smell in the air as the women walked at dawn on that first Easter Sunday morning.

They had spices in hand, sure. Myrrh, aloes, all the tricks designed to soften the harsh reality of death. But no perfume in the world can hide the smell of crushed dreams. These women weren't just carrying oils; they were bearing the weight of a world where Caesar always wins.

Rome had taught them well. Empires are great at driving home a point, especially when that point is nailed through someone's wrist into a piece of timber. These women knew how this story ended—Rome always ends the story. The empire had perfected

the gospel of fear: submit or suffer. Bow or be broken. The imperial narrative was written in blood across three continents. Stories that challenge Caesar don't get sequels; they get silenced. And everybody knew it.

Look at their history. Every time hope started to flicker among God's people, Rome's boot came down harder. Rebellions crushed. Prophetic movements scattered. Leaders executed as public spectacles.

The crosses lining Jerusalem's roads weren't just punishment; they were billboards advertising Rome's monopoly on hope. They said, "Dream if you must, but keep those dreams small, obedient, and to yourself."

And Jesus?

Jesus was just the latest dreamer crushed beneath Rome's boot. Another prophet silenced. A spark of hope smothered before

breakfast. Nothing new under the imperial sun. His talk of a new world had ended exactly as Rome intended ... with a humiliating execution and scattered followers.

The message was clear: no matter how compelling your vision of a new realm of justice and peace, no matter how many healings or feedings or transformations you inspire, Caesar gets the final word.

So these women, full of grief and carrying nothing but spices and shattered expectations, came to pay their respects. One last act of devotion. Maybe even defiance, though it was the quiet kind—the kind that doesn't make headlines. The kind of defiance that brings myrrh instead of Molotov cocktails. The kind that believes love deserves at least a goodbye.

I wonder what they talked about on that walk. Did they reminisce about the Rabbi who'd changed their lives? Did they swap stories

of his teachings, his healings, those moments when his words made the world seem wider somehow?

Or did they walk in the heavy silence of those whose hopes have been crushed?

Either way, they moved forward, step by reluctant step, because that's what love does. It shows up, even when showing up hurts. Especially when showing up hurts.

But when they got there, the story they thought they knew went off the rails.

The stone? Rolled away.

The tomb? Empty.

The corpse they expected? Nowhere to be found.

Reality refused to follow the **script**. The narrative they'd been taught—that death wins, that empires are our destiny, that resistance is futile—suddenly developed a plot hole big enough to drive a funeral procession through.

Then ... boom ... divine disruption. Lightning-bright messengers, shimmering with the kind of presence that makes your knees buckle, toss out a question that sounds simple but hits like a sledgehammer: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

Because that's what you do in a world run by every garden-variety Caesar. You look for life in all the wrong places. You expect power to wear a crown, not bear a cross. You expect tombs to stay shut, empires to stay intact, and death to be the final word. You train yourself to hope small, to dream within the prison bars of what's "realistic." Because in Caesar's world, you measure reality by what **Caesar** says is possible, not by what **God** declares is inevitable.

Easter doesn't play by Caesar's rules. The tomb wasn't just a grave anymore—it was a megaphone blasting out a new hope.

Words that shattered the concrete certainty of death, that rewrote the ending Rome thought it had secured.

Now, don't get it twisted. This isn't some Hallmark-card moment. It's not about butterflies and wearing pastels and the flowers blooming in Spring. Resurrection isn't safe. It's a disruption. A protest. A full-throated, earth-shaking "no" to empire's finality. It's God's most radical act of holy defiance.

Think about what's happening: God says "no" to the most powerful empire on earth. "No" to the seemingly iron-clad rules of death. "No" to the idea that violence has the final word.

God is unveiling a power that makes Rome's swords and crosses look like castoff props from the set of *Gladiator*. Rome's most potent weapon—death itself—has just been rendered impotent.

Caesar said peace comes through power, through intimidation and crucifixion. But God pulled off the most subversive plot twist in history. Rome said, "***This*** is your end." God said, "Yeah, no. I don't think so."

Think about what this means. Every time Caesar executes someone, he thinks he's writing the end of their story. "Here lies a troublemaker, silenced forever."

But resurrection says, "Turns out. I'm not done yet. I'll be continuing this narrative without your permission." It's the ultimate act of holy editing—taking the ending Caesar wrote and transforming it into the opening lines of an entirely new narrative authored by God.

And the women? They were the first to read that story out loud. The first preachers of the risen Christ weren't megachurch

pastors or televangelists. Heck, in a wonderful stroke of divine genius—they weren't even **men**.

They were women—women whose voices Rome never would've credentialed, who showed up back at Jesus HQ preaching a gospel too dangerous for polite company. But isn't that just like God—choosing the ones who usually sit at the outcast table at lunch, the ones nobody else would invite to the microphone?

These were women living under a triple oppression—Roman occupation, patriarchal structures, and religious marginalization. They weren't even supposed to be witnesses in court, let alone witnesses to the most important event in history. But God has a stubborn habit of elevating the voices that empire tries to mute. God keeps entrusting the most explosive news to the messengers nobody's used to taking seriously. It's central to what Jesus is about to understand that there's a message in that upside-down method.

Of course, when these newly ordained preachers climbed into the pulpit that first Easter, the men thought they were out of their minds.

Brilliant plot move, right? But resurrection rarely fits into the carefully labeled boxes we've built. It doesn't consult our systems of power, doesn't wait for permission from empire or ecclesiastical gatekeepers.

Resurrection just ... bursts forth.

We're so quick to dismiss stories that don't align with the reality we've accepted. "Idle tales," Luke calls it. Nonsense. Women's talk. I mean, come on.

The disciples had already decided what was possible, and an empty tomb wasn't anywhere in the script they thought they were following. Grief, they could handle. Defeat, they understood. But victory? That was a plane they'd forgotten how to land.

And Peter, to his credit, at least runs to see for himself. He finds an empty tomb and discarded linens—the final words in Rome’s script tossed aside like yesterday’s laundry. And maybe, just maybe, it starts to dawn on Peter that death isn’t the only story on the table anymore.

Look: Peter had denied Jesus three times. He’d sworn he didn’t know Jesus. Had failed spectacularly at the moment of truth. By any reasonable standard, his character in the Jesus movie should have been over—a cautionary tale of how not to follow the Rabbi. But resurrection doesn’t just rewrite **death’s** ending; it rewrites **our** endings too. It offers second chapters to those who thought their story was finished.

See, resurrection doesn’t just whisper, “Everything will be okay someday.” It declares, “Things are already different--right now.” It’s not the epilogue. It’s the new prologue. The curtain hasn’t dropped. It’s just gone up.

That's the audacity of Easter. It doesn't just promise some spiritual reality after we die. It announces a new reality breaking into our world right **now**. It declares that the way of Jesus—love, self-giving, mercy, justice—Isn't just a nice ethical system; it's the truest reality in the universe. More real than Rome's swords. More lasting than Caesar's statues.

Rome built the Pax Romana on terror and domination—where crosses are the final word. Jesus builds the peace of the reign of God on hope and love. Rome staked its claim through bloodshed. Jesus staked **his** claim by refusing to stay quiet in the face of the exploitation of the vulnerable.

Rome's peace required constant violence to maintain. Armed soldiers sending a message about what to expect if Caesar doesn't like you. Crosses on every hill. El Salvadoran concentration camps for the "undesirables."

But Jesus offers a peace that doesn't need to crucify others to sustain itself. A peace built on **reconciliation**, not subjugation. On **healing**, not hurting. On enough for **all**, not excess for **some**.

Which brings us to today. Because, let's face it, Caesar never really left. Empire just changed its logo. Maybe now it wears a suit and runs a tech company in Silicon Valley. Maybe it stands behind a podium or on cable news and speaks in soundbites. Maybe it thrives in systems that separate children from their parents, LGBTQ people from those they love, Black people from their dignity, and trans people from their true identities. Maybe it makes toadying up to dictators look like policy, and exploitation seem like economic strategy.

Caesar is whoever or whatever tells us that **power** is what matters most. That people are **disposable** if they stand in the way of profit. That **some** lives matter more than others. That violence is **necessary** for peace. That domination by a **few** is the natural order.

Or maybe it shows up in church sanctuaries when people confuse respectability with righteousness. When they protect the institution at the expense of the gospel. When they mistake empire's comfort for the Spirit's peace. When they preach a Jesus who looks suspiciously like a mashup of Elon Musk and Rambo with a cross tattoo—a Jesus who shares the politics of Christian nationalism, its prejudices and priorities—rather than the Jesus who challenges them all.

But the tomb is still empty.

Which means Caesar's gospel is still a lie.

Every time we choose love over power, we tell the world the tomb is empty. Every time we stand with the oppressed instead of the oppressor, we retell the story of the empty tomb. Every time we choose reconciliation over retaliation, we testify that the tomb isn't the end of the story. Every time we refuse to let

death—whether physical, spiritual, or social—have the final word, we live as resurrection people.

And our job?

It's not just to believe it. It's to live like it's **true**. To carry resurrection into all the "not yet" places. To confront every lie that says **power** is what wins. To resist despair with defiant **hope**. To build communities that smell less like death and more like new **life**.

We don't just **believe** in resurrection; we **participate** in it. We become part of God's resurrection project in the world. We join the divine work of rolling away stones that trap people in the tombs of poverty, prejudice, and pain. We help usher in God's upside-down kingdom where the last are first, the least are treasured, and love sits on the throne.

We proclaim, not just in words but in how we show up in the world, that love still rises. That justice still rolls. That grace still walks out of tombs that the world thought it sealed **shut**.

Imagine if we really lived this way. If followers of Jesus were known not as bastions of judgment but as outposts of resurrection. If our communities were recognized not for what we're **against** but for how fiercely we **love**. If our politics were shaped not by fear but by the confidence that comes from knowing the end of the **story**—that love wins, that justice prevails, that mercy triumphs.

Because Christ is risen. Still. And Rome **still** doesn't know what to do with that.

But we who try to follow Jesus faithfully, we know what to do. We roll away the stones of apathy, fear, and empire-shaped religion. We rise with him. We build churches that look less like fortresses

and more like resurrection gardens. We speak truth about how God sees the world, even when it makes the powerful squirm.

We're the kind of Easter people who don't just decorate the sanctuary once a year, but who live with rolled-away stones and open doors and trembling joy. We practice resurrection in how we vote, how we spend, how we welcome the stranger, how we care for creation, how we speak to and about one another.

We're people who know that the most powerful force in the universe isn't military might or market value or majority rule. It's love that gives itself away. The kind that doesn't cling to power but empties itself for others. The kind that turns the other cheek, not out of weakness but from a strength so secure it doesn't need to dominate to prove itself.

We're people who know that when Rome says, "This is how the world works," God says, "Yeah, no. I've got something better for

everybody in mind, not just the folks born at the front of the line."

Because Easter isn't **just** about Jesus rising from the dead. It's about new life rising up in **us**. It's about hope rising in desperate places. It's about justice finally getting to speak its name in oppressive systems. It's about love standing strong wherever hatred seems to have the upper hand.

Because the tomb is still empty, signaling a dawn Caesar can't control, ignore, or deny.

Amen.