



Easter Sunday

April 16, 2017
Laurel Neal



Luke 23:55-24:12 (NIV)

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.

Jesus Has Risen

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” Then they remembered his words.

When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

The Unridden Route

Luke 23:55-24:12 & Colossians 1:15-20

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I

Here’s what I love about how the New Testament handles the resurrection of Jesus: it records that every single person found it shocking and confusing. Why is this? Well, because even in the really old days of the 1st century, dead people stayed dead. The average person expected this. Yes, there were some ideas about resurrection within Judaism at the time. But absolutely none of these included the possibility that a single human being might be raised from the dead “in the middle of ongoing history”¹ — as happens here with Jesus.

In other words, even — and perhaps especially — in 1st-century Israel, people were completely unprepared for someone to die and not stay dead. So I love it that the gospels honestly report the astonishment and disbelief of everyone who came to the tomb that first Easter morning. Because, you know what? The resurrection of Jesus is hard to believe. The women who went to the tomb that morning? They were quite simply intending to follow the burial customs of their culture. After all, they had watched Jesus die. So here’s what they expected: they expected to find Jesus’ lifeless body — and to anoint his body with spices as a sign of their devotion and respect. As a result, these women were startled and confused when “two men in dazzling clothes” told them that Jesus wasn’t dead after all — but alive!

¹ Marcus J. Borg & N. T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. San Francisco: Harper, 1999, 118.

So if any of us have trouble believing the resurrection really happened, then we're in good company. Because Jesus' own mother and closest friends couldn't believe it either.

II

This, then, is a day for talking about impossible, unprecedented things that happen. The women who went to the tomb that morning — together with Jesus' other followers and friends — never claimed the resurrection was a believable event. In fact, they themselves claimed it was unbelievable; definitely unprecedented; and maybe even impossible. But they did claim that it happened — and because it happened they believed it. Plus, the resurrection began to make sense to them. It began to make sense as just the kind of impossible reversal a God like their God might actually pull off. Just as he'd managed to rescue the Israelites out of Egypt in the Exodus. Or to bring the Israelites back from exile in Babylon. They'd seen God act in unbelievable and unprecedented ways before.

Of course, it's different for us. We've got zero experience with resurrection. Zero experience with people dying, and being dead for a couple of days, and then coming back to life. But other unprecedented things take place in our world all the time. Events that are significantly new, but about which there have been hints and anticipations — and for which there are analogies.

The Exodus event in the Old Testament functioned like this for the women who came to the tomb — and for Jesus' other followers as well. The Exodus was a hint, or anticipation, of the resurrection. It served as an analogy. God had acted dramatically in the past. God had done something startling and unprecedented. Why not again?

I think we have hints and analogies even today, if we have eyes to see them. And I'd like to offer one analogy to you this morning concerning the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: an analogy that comes to us from the world of Big Wave surfing. Yes, you heard me correctly: the world of Big Wave surfing.

III

So let's begin with a little surfing history. Surfing didn't become a phenomenon until the 1950s — but people had been surfing the world's oceans for almost a thousand years before that. For a long time, surfers paddled out from shore to catch “first reef” waves. These are the waves that break on the reef closest to land. From the beginning, though, surfers knew there were other waves — much bigger waves — that broke farther from shore. Giant waves — 20, 30, 40 feet high — that broke further out, on the 2nd and 3rd reefs. Waves that no one knew how to get to. Waves everyone thought were impossible to catch and impossible to ride.

But the lure of those Big Waves was irresistible, and surfers began to attempt the impossible. In 1957, an American surfer named Greg Noll rode the biggest wave ever: a wave 25 feet high, at Waimea Bay on the north shore of Oahu. As impressive as this was, it was still just “first reef” surfing — and surfers wanted more. They wanted more, but they faced two challenges: the challenge of access to bigger waves, and the challenge of the speed of those waves. Here's why access was a challenge. In most places, it took as long as a couple of hours to paddle out to those 2nd and 3rd reefs — and that just wasn't practical. So surfers tried helicopter drops. But those weren't very practical either. And speed was a challenge because Big Waves are so much faster than smaller ones. You can't catch Big Waves paddling a surfboard. It simply can't be done. If the Big Waves were faster, then surfers had to be faster, too.

So then: early in the 1990s, a group of Big Wave surfers began working hard to solve these problems. They experimented with smaller surfboards. They experimented with strapping their feet to their boards like windsurfers and snowboarders do. And they developed a brand new technique for reaching — and catching — the Big Waves; and called it “tow-in surfing.”

This new technique consisted of a team of three people:

- The surfer.
- A second person on a Jet Ski — who tows the surfer out to the 2nd or 3rd reef — and then “whips” the surfer into the wave.
- And a third person — also on a Jet Ski — called “the rescuer.” The rescuer’s job is to wait in what’s called “the channel” — ready, in the event of a wipe-out, to grab the surfer out of harm’s way.

Big Wave surfers tested all these techniques. First with waves that were 30-35 feet high in places like Waimea Bay. And eventually with 10-story waves — waves 50-60 feet high — in a place called Peahi, off the north coast of Maui. In each case, these surfers accomplished the unprecedented. They did things earlier surfers had only dreamed of doing — riding what they called “the unriden route.”

The stand-out among these surfing pioneers was a guy named Laird Hamilton — who, in this resurrection analogy I’m drawing, is a little bit like Jesus.

IV

Laird Hamilton had excelled at surfing all his life. He’d co-created the tow-in surfing technique — and he’d personally surfed some of the biggest waves anyone had ever seen. But there was one particularly exceptional day in Laird Hamilton’s surfing career: August 17, 2000.

Here’s how the narrators of *Riding Giants*, a surfing documentary, describe it:

In August of 2000...Laird Hamilton took another giant leap by riding a wave so treacherous and so outrageous it affected the course of Big Wave surfing history.

The wave broke 3000 miles south of Maui, on the French Polynesian island of Tahiti, at a reef pass known simply as Teapuhoo...a wave almost unfathomable in its mass, power, and ferocity.

Laird's ride [that day] was the most amazing, the single most significant ride in history — because, more than any other ride, it completely restructured...our perception of what was possible.

Teapuhoo is a shallow-water reef-break located off the southwest coast of Tahiti. In that particular spot, the ocean sucks water downward into a huge well. In the process, it also creates an especially massive wall of moving water. A massive wall of moving water that then “explodes laterally onto Teapuhoo's extremely shallow, razor-sharp reef. The result is an extraordinary wave” — and a dangerous one. A wipe-out at Teapuhoo can easily kill you.

On August 17, 2000, Teapuhoo produced a truly monster wave. A wave 60 feet high — which, just to give you some perspective, is two-and-a-half times the height of this sanctuary. A wave much bigger than the ones you just saw in the video. A wave most people still consider to be the most treacherous wave anyone has ever ridden. And Laird Hamilton was there to ride it. Here's what happened. Darrick Doerner was the tow-er that day, and he towed Laird out to the 3rd reef behind his Jet Ski. An unusually large swell appeared on the horizon, and Darrick towed Laird into position. Laird released the tow rope, and *drove down into* that 60-foot wave. *Drove* down into its huge cylindrical vortex. He actually disappeared inside that wave's gigantic tunnel — and rode it without ever faltering. Finally emerging “over the wave's shoulder”²: victorious and alive.



² Wikipedia

This photograph appeared almost immediately on the cover of *Surfer* magazine, astonishing everyone who saw it. The ride had really happened — but no one who saw that photograph could believe it. Not even professional surfers like the great Greg Noll.

V

This ride of Laird Hamilton's at Teahupoo serves as a resurrection analogy for me in at least two ways. First, there's the unprecedented superiority of Laird Hamilton himself — which I want to argue is analogous to the unprecedented superiority of Jesus. In the world of Big Wave surfing, Laird Hamilton is always described in superlative terms. "Laird's the king out there," people say.

- "No one comes close to his abilities."
- "[He's] the best Big Wave rider the world has ever seen."
- "[He's] the greatest and bravest...in the recorded history of surfing."
- "[He's] the best of the best."

As we heard just moments ago, the New Testament describes Jesus in similar terms.

- "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
- All things have been created through him and for him.
- He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Like Laird Hamilton, Jesus possesses a kind of unprecedented superiority concerning who he is and what he is able to do.

VI

Then, second, there's Laird Hamilton's unprecedented victory at Teahupoo — which is analogous to Jesus' unprecedented victory at Calvary. Laird's wave at Teahupoo has been described as:

- a “freak of hydrodynamics”;
- a “once-in-a-lifetime” wave,
- “treacherous and outrageous,”
- “almost unfathomable in its mass, power, and ferocity.”

A wave so imposing — and so fearsome — that Laird's partner that day, Derrick Doerner, had second thoughts about it. In fact, Derrick turned around on his Jet Ski that day to tell Laird not to let go of the rope. But Laird was already gone. And then, there he was, coming out the other side — victorious and alive.

The surfing world gave that particular wave a name. They call it, simply, The Wave: capital *The*, capital *Wave*. And what everybody says is that Laird Hamilton didn't merely survive The Wave: he conquered it.

The “wave” Jesus faced was even more fearsome. He faced, as we know, his own physical death — by the cruelest form of execution ever devised, either before or since. But he also faced the experience of becoming the sin-bearer for all of humanity. He faced the responsibility of answering to God for every sin and every crime — for every act of malice, and injury, and evil in the world. Past, present, and future. At one point, at least — in the Garden of Gethsemane — Jesus considered “not letting go of the rope.” But then he was gone. He died, taking all the brokenness and sin of the world down with him into death. And then, amazingly, we see him, coming out the other side — victorious and alive. Not merely surviving death, but conquering it.

According to one Big Wave surfer, that photo on the cover of *Surfer* magazine “stopped everyone's heart. We all asked,” he said, “Where and what is that?!” Which, the way I figure it, is pretty much what happened

to the women at the tomb — and to everyone else who'd seen Jesus die, and now found him alive. Where and what is that?!

VII

So it's like this. In the spring of A.D. 30, Jesus took another giant leap — by riding a wave so treacherous and so outrageous it affected the entire course of human history. The wave broke outside the city of Jerusalem, in the Roman colony of Palestine, at a reef pass known simply as Golgotha, The Place of the Skull. It was a wave almost unfathomable in its mass, power, and ferocity — a wave of evil and death. And Jesus' ride was the single most amazing, most significant ride in history — because it completely restructured our perception of what is possible.

I invite you, on this Easter Day, to consider what's possible. And to take into account something you already know: that sometimes what's possible is the impossible, and the unprecedented, and the unbelievable.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!