Easter 3A / May 4, 2014 / Luke 24:13-35 / Don Holmstrom

Grace and Peace to you in the name of Jesus, the Crucified Messiah, who has been raised from the dead. Amen.

When we studied the life of Jesus in confirmation, you students will remember we watched excerpts from the movie “Jesus of Nazareth” to assist us in our Bible study. My favorite scene of that movie comes almost at the very end.

It is set late on Easter morning. Jesus is alive again and has left the cemetery. An anti-Jesus religious leader comes to the tomb. He is horrified to discover that the Lord’s body is no longer there. The tomb is open; the stone lies off to one side.

He goes in. All he sees are burial cloths on the stone slab. They lie in the shape of a cross. Then he says: “Now it begins. It all begins.”

You and I don’t usually think of cemeteries as a place of beginnings. But somehow Love has broken the chains of death that morning, and Jesus and the world have a new beginning.

I have a theory about that first Easter morning. I call it the “Big Bang Theory.” Now, I realize that title has already been taken by scientists and TV show producers. But I’m not talking about the Big Bang Theory that describes the creation of the universe; nor am I talking about the Big Bang Theory that follows the exploits of Dr. Sheldon Cooper, Leonard, Howard, Raj, Penny and the rest.

No, my Big Bang Theory is this. When God’s love shows up early Easter morning, it is so concentrated and so potent that it simply blows the tomb open. It creates life, where death has been. Love will do that, you know. Give new life. Fling doors wide open. Shine light into darkness. And then send you running to tell others.

That’s my Big Bang Theory of God’s Love—a noiseless explosion that doesn’t destroy but creates. Now, a corollary to my theory is that God’s love shows up in the most surprising ways and in the most surprising places. Take this morning’s gospel reading for example.

Two people—I’m pretty sure they’re confirmation students—are walking along a road on Easter afternoon. They’ve been to a Youth Gathering in Jerusalem and are walking home, because apparently the church van broke down.

They’re talking about the Gathering and its tragic ending. Jesus was the keynote speaker and he was great. But then he was arrested and then executed.

These students are wondering what’s going to happen next. They’ve been texting back and forth with their friends and nobody seems to know anything for sure.

As they look up from their smart phones for a moment, they notice a stranger, who is now walking beside them.

“What’s going on?” he asks. “You two look a little down.”

The student named Cleo looks at the stranger and says, “Seriously? I mean, seriously? You don’t know what happened in J-town on Friday?”

The stranger shakes his head, though he has a slight smile on his face.

The other student—her name is Chloe, she’s Cleo’s twin sister—Chloe tells the stranger about Jesus dying. “He was just taken away and killed. How could they do that? He was awesome!” And Cleo throws in, “Yeah, he was such a beast!”

They stop talking but keep walking, shuffling along in the dust.

Then Cleo says to the stranger, “We heard a rumor that Jesus was alive. But you know how rumors are. I mean, like he’s going to come back to life again? You know anybody who’s come back from the dead? I don’t mean like zombie alive, I mean like really alive!”

Now the stranger seems agitated. And he says to Cleo and Chloe, “You two are so foolish. You don’t believe what Jesus told you. He said he would die, and then rise again. And yet you don’t believe him. But you believe the things you read on Facebook. You believe text messages. You believe whispers in the hallways at school. And yet you don’t believe what Jesus says.”

Cleo and Chloe look at one another, but say nothing. And then for the next hour, as they walk along, this stranger patiently teaches them about Jesus, and about what God and the prophets have said about the Messiah. These students are astounded. And Chloe whispers to Cleo: “This is like the best confirmation class ever.” And Cleo adds, “This guy is so much better than our pastors.”

By the time they get to their hometown of Emmaus, Cleo and Chloe just want to hang out with this stranger. So, they invite him home for supper.

Their house is just across the street from Emmaus high school—the Screaming Eagles. Their parents and younger brother Clancy are spending the weekend camping at the Sea of Galilee State Park so they’re on their own. Chloe and Cleo find some leftovers and a loaf of bread and put them on the table.

Before they eat, all three hold hands and sing Johnny Appleseed. And then, oddly enough, their special guest suddenly becomes the host of this meal. This stranger takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and hands a piece to each of them.

And that is when the light comes on for Chloe and Cleo. They suddenly know who this stranger is. It is Jesus—not a zombie Jesus, a dead man walking, but Jesus alive and well. And, lo and behold, before they can even say one word, he vanishes, just like that.

And yet here’s the strangest thing of all. It doesn’t seem to matter to Chloe and Cleo that they can’t see him. Because they realize that when you have the bread of life in your hand, and the Good News and the Spirit of God in your hearts, you’ve got all you need. Jesus is indeed with you—forever with you—whether you can see him or not.

Well, these two confirmation students are so excited now, they do something truly incredible. They toss on their backpacks and head back to Jerusalem—suddenly full of energy, and with news to tell. News they simply have to share in person—text messages simply won’t do.

And it’s right here where my Big Bang Theory of God’s Love comes in again. When God’s love shows up at the table, and speaks a word of forgiveness to you, and hands you a piece of bread, then goodness knows you’re not going to be the same person you were when you first sat down at the table.

There’s no telling what you might do now—you might run off to tell your story about Jesus; you might decide to face down a bully, or help someone else who’s being bullied. You might forgive someone who’s hurt you, or apologize to someone you’ve hurt. You might start eating lunch with the uncool kids at your school, even make them part of your group. You might see Jesus in the stranger. So keep your hearts open. You don’t want to miss a thing now, when the Big Bang of God’s Love goes off.

It went off in your baptism, you know, when God gave you never-ending love, forgiveness, and new life.

And the Big Bang of God’s Love is about to go off again. When you stand up here and confirm your faith, God’s love and resurrection power are here. You may not hear the bang, you may not feel a thing, because often love is contained in silence and gentleness. But Love’s power is mighty. It raises the dead. It sends you out to tell the story. Doors blow open, light shines. And like Cleo and Chloe discover on that Emmaus Road, God’s love is right there beside you all the time. And this is the deal: God’s presence in your life does not depend on your faith; God’s presence depends on God’s promise to Love you forever. And God keeps promises.

“Now it begins. It all begins.” So says the religious leader in that empty tomb. New life begins there, and it keeps coming one power surge after another—for Chloe, for Cleo, and for you and me.

Now it begins. It all begins. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed. Alleluia!

Amen.