

Sunday, April 14, 2013: John 21:1-19 (ESV)

by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue

One of my favorite lines in *Hamlet* is the prince's reminder to Horatio, who is uncertain what to make of a ghost, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." I've spent much of my life among academics, Christian and otherwise, many of whom are skittish about references to mystical moments, prescient dreams, "thin space," telepathy, visions or inexplicable healings. Curiously, even those whose faith is solidly scriptural often shy away from conversations about boundary experiences or avoid the topic of angels.

But there they are. Angels, visions of animals on a sheet, fiery chariots, withering fig trees and demonic voices. And there's Jesus a few days after his bloody death cooking up breakfast on the beach and walking through locked doors, looking like a stranger, then suddenly looking like his familiar self. And there's Paul, blind and bruised after a close encounter with heavenly light. You can't write these things off, and you can't reduce them to parable or confine them to the merely symbolic; much as I respect parables and symbols and eschew flat-footed literalism, some stories challenge us to stretch our understanding of plausibility.

Though literalism is a dangerous habit of mind, I appreciate Augustine's wisdom in suggesting that the work of interpretation begins in entertaining the literal meaning of the word. Similarly, I appreciate scientists who are able to maintain an open moment of silence in response to inexplicable events before dismissing them or insisting on an empirical explanation. The discipline of pausing over the implausible helps preserve the humility of Hamlet's reminder and of Mary's amazed question: "How can these things be?" The answer to that question, which has been echoed by astrophysicists, geneticists and doctors who know that mystery is involved in healing, is multidimensional. There are ways of being that lie beyond the jurisdiction of the five senses; we know, not just from theology but also from science, that our senses account for only a limited part of what is actual. To reach beyond them we need mathematics and particle physics, bioenergetics and poetry, abstract art and good biblical theology. We need people whose callings take them to those borderlands and who deploy their imaginations in the service of barely conceivable

truth.

One example of such a calling is a story about a shy congregant who asked her pastor if she might accompany him to the hospital and pray with patients. He consented, a little surprised, and over ensuing months witnessed extraordinary healings that seemed to result directly from her prayers and laying-on of hands. When he asked her what she thought was happening (how could these things be?), she admitted that she had thought for some time that she had a gift of healing but wasn't sure how to use it. Healings happen. Information is transmitted and change effected in subtle and immeasurable ways. Postresurrection stories may testify not only to the resurrection but also to the fact that there are more things in heaven and earth than we generally take into account.

I appreciate Fritjof Capra's writing about links between particle physics and mysticism, the way Big Bang theorists bring new meaning to the Genesis story, and the way testimonies to heavenly apparitions and saints with stigmata and answers to scientific problems that appear in dreams challenge a too-narrow understanding of "heaven and earth." I wonder sometimes if conditioned resistance to simple-minded literalism may keep us from considering how many implausible things might actually be literally true, and how, if they are, we might need to recognize at least a sixth sense or a fourth dimension (physicists say there are at least 11), and how string theory, black holes, telepathy and energetic healings may deserve more than a nervous shrug.

Poets and artists help us imagine those other dimensions and altered states. Van Gogh offers a visible reminder of how matter verges on energy and how energy gathers into form: in his paintings, mountains crest like waves and trees turn to light at the edges. As Emerson put it, "All things swim and glitter." C. S. Lewis describes creatures on the planet Malacandra who live at a higher frequency and have subtle, barely visible bodies. And in a whimsical film by Wim Wenders called *Wings of Desire*, two angels are sent to "hang around" earthly folk. They attempt only the subtlest kinds of interventions but somehow exert palpable influence on humans who mostly remain unaware.

On our tiny planet, in this segment of history that lies between God's self-revelation in Christ and the fulfillment and end of history, our assignment seems to be to find our way around this thin layer of breathable air and arable soil—stewarding, noticing and narrating what we see in ways that keep us humbly attentive to the "hints and guesses" that lead us toward a wider world where more things are possible than are

dreamt of in our philosophies—and where a meal is being prepared for us.