

Easter Day sermon
April 4, 2010
Christ Church, Andover
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Luke 24:1-12

Happy Easter, everyone! The Lord is Risen! **He is risen indeed!** It is a joy to see all of you here today on this most important day in the life of Christian people everywhere. It is a day being celebrated by Christians throughout the world – the first year in some time when the Eastern and Western calendars coincide and we mark the Day of Resurrection on the same day together. We welcome all who have come today to renew your engagement in the mystery of Christ’s resurrection. And to those of you who might be here not because you share the Christian faith, but perhaps out of curiosity, or as a courtesy to someone you care about, we welcome you, too! And we hope you’ll leave here today with a better idea of why all of this matters so much to us.

If there’s one piece of advice that could summarize our approach to the story of Jesus’ life it just might be to “expect the unexpected.” It’s a story replete with the unexpected – from his unlikely conception and obscure birth in a stable, to his precocious engagement with religious leaders at the age of twelve, to his baptism by an fiery preacher in the wilderness, or his going up against the religious establishment by healing on the Sabbath, or upending social conventions by befriending prostitutes and tax collectors – or by his making such a big point of including Gentiles in his circle of concern. Jesus didn’t do anything in the conventional way. And his teachings – about the kingdom of God, about how we treat our enemies, about attitudes toward wealth, or the place of outsiders to the community – well, they just about turned everything on its head.

So why should we expect anything less of his death and the events that follow?!

We’ve heard this morning from the Gospel of Luke an account of what happened after his death and burial. In it, we learn, as we do in each of the other three

gospels, that there was a group of women who arrived at the tomb on the morning after the Sabbath was complete with spices for the care of his body. They expected to find his body wrapped in cloth, unwrap it, and lovingly wash and then rub the fragrant spices into his mangled corpse, to bring at least some degree of care and dignity to his burial if not his death.

But to their great surprise, they found the stone of the tomb rolled away, his body nowhere to be found, and two dazzling creatures announcing to them that “he is not here, but has risen.”

And so, it was a group of *women* who were the very first witnesses of the resurrection. And they became the apostles to the apostles. Women, whose witness held no legal authority in the world of their day, were given the authority to announce the resurrection to Jesus’ disciples. These women didn’t stand around trying to figure it out. They went right to work! Their response to the resurrection: go into action mode! Go tell the disciples. Get to work!

The disciples, of course, were in disbelief. Peter couldn’t imagine how this could be. He had to go see for himself. He returned home – amazed, dumbfounded at all that had happened, still unable to grasp what had taken place.

I have a feeling it was the example of those first women, and not that hapless band of confused disciples, that inspired the early church to spend a whole lot less time debating the how or why of resurrection –and instead, go ahead and put the resurrection into practice! It took the resurrected Christ showing up for them a few times, but eventually even those confused disciples started to get it! And even they began to put it all into practice. They learned to practice resurrection.

The author, Nora Gallagher, talks about this notion of “practicing resurrection.” She says:

When I think about the resurrection now, I not only wonder about what happened to Jesus. I ponder what happened to his disciples. Something happened to them, too. They went into hiding after the crucifixion, but after the resurrection appearances, they walked back out into the world. They became braver and stronger; they visited strangers, and healed the sick. It was

not just what they saw when they saw Jesus, or how they saw it, but what was set free in them. ... What if the resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone, but also about what those appearances point to, what they ask? It's finally what we do with them that matters; make them into superstitions or use them as stepping stones to new life. Maybe resurrection, like everything else, needs to be practiced.¹

Practicing resurrection! It's what we all really long to be able to do. To move beyond a crippling grief over the death of a loved one. To envision and live into new opportunities following the loss of a job. To live through a debilitating depression and find new reasons for hope. To overcome our fears and live life with a spirit of adventure and possibility. These are all part of what it means to practice resurrection.

Jim Wallis, in his book, *God's Politics*, tells a powerful story about practicing resurrection. It's a story set in South Africa during apartheid. Nelson Mandela was still in prison, and apartheid seemed to still have a stranglehold on power. Wallis was at an ecumenical service at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town where Archbishop Desmond Tutu was presiding, when a group of the notorious South African Security Police broke into the service. Wallis writes:

Tutu stopped preaching and just looked at the intruders as they lined the walls of his cathedral, wielding writing pads and tape recorders. ... They had already arrested Tutu and other church leaders just a few weeks before and kept them in jail for several days. ... After meeting their eyes with his in a steely gaze, [Tutu] acknowledged their power ... but reminded them that he served a higher power than their political authority. Then, in the most extraordinary challenge to political tyranny I have ever witnessed, Archbishop Desmond Tutu told the representatives of South African Apartheid, "Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" He said it with a smile on his face and an enticing warmth in his invitation, but with a clarity and

¹ Nora Gallagher, *The Complicity of Silence*, a sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, May 28, 2006.

a boldness that took everyone's breath away. The congregation's response was electric. The crowd was literally transformed by the bishop's challenge to power. From a cowering fear of the heavily armed security forces that surrounded the cathedral and greatly outnumbered the band of worshippers, we literally leaped to our feet, shouted the praises of God and began dancing. We danced out of the cathedral to meet the awaiting police and military forces who not knowing what else to do, backed up to provide the space for the people of faith to dance for freedom in the streets of South Africa.²

Bishop Tutu's declaration that apartheid "had already lost" was a prophetic announcement of something that had no basis in the observed reality, and yet, strangely, and powerfully, helped bring it into being in the most remarkable way. He was already, in spite of the evidence, living into and inviting others into an imagined and hoped for future. He was practicing resurrection.

Mary Magdelene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them didn't wait till all the evidence was on their side. They jumped out there and did something! They kicked into gear. They lived "as if" it were true. They began living into, practicing, the reality of resurrection.

Christians are by definition "resurrection people," baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. Resurrection people are people who live into our hopes, often in spite of evidence to the contrary.

We all need to be reminded that that's who we are from time to time! Today is the day. Let's expect the unexpected. Let's live in hope. Let's decide to go ahead and live into the reality God has prepared for us. Let's practice resurrection!

² Jim Wallis, *God's Politics*. I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano for this quote.