

April 16, 2017 (Easter)

TEXT: Luke 24:1–12

TITLE: Easter Dress Rehearsals

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today is Resurrection Sunday. Everything's changed. The purple of Lent has been replaced with the bright white of Easter. The darkness of Good Friday has given way to boisterous trumpets, full stop organs, and shouted "Alleluias." We've had a year to prepare for this morning—to review our checklists and get ready for the crowds and joyful commotion associated with Easter. But in a funny way, that is the main thing that distinguishes us from the celebrants of the first Easter long ago. We knew Resurrection Sunday was coming; they didn't.

Now it's true that according to the gospels Jesus told his disciples on several occasions he was destined to be handed over to the authorities, whipped and killed, and that on the third day he would rise again. But they didn't understand what that meant—not really. They knew Jesus as a prophet who pointed them to the righteousness of God. And they believed in a future day of resurrection and restoration, the long-awaited Day of the Lord. But at the end of that first Holy Week, all that was truly clear to the disciples was that Jesus was dead. He'd been crucified - brutally, tragically—and quickly laid in a tomb sealed with a huge stone. Once the sun set on Good Friday, everyone went into hiding or auto-pilot. They returned to their homes; they lit their Sabbath candles; they grieved and re-played the events of the past hours; they worried whether the Roman authorities would come for them next. Once the Sabbath obligations were over, the women collected spices so that at Sunday's first light they could go finish the burial rituals for Jesus there hadn't been time to do properly on Friday. We can look ahead and boldly circle Easter on our calendars; back then, to those women it was just another Sunday morning under Roman oppression in a city that had thought fit to kill their Lord, an innocent man, on a cross.

We like knowing what to expect. We like being prepared for what's to come. A man went to a fortune teller and asked her, "Tell me, are there golf courses in heaven?" To which she smiled and said, "Oh yes, the golf courses in heaven are beautiful beyond anything you could imagine!" Then she paused and said, "And you'll be teeing off at 8:30 tomorrow morning." Generally, we like to know what to expect. We imagine what is to come and then make our plans accordingly. Knowing when a report is due allows us to work steadily toward its completion. Knowing what we will need to take on a road trip lets us plan in advance how the suitcases should be put in the trunk before a single item is packed.

Ask any chess player and they'll tell you that they never make a move in a chess game without having played through in their mind 2, 3 or 4 possible responses their opponent will make to that move. No army general would initiate an act of aggression against an adversary without having calculated what the enemy's

response will be. Even as I say that, I'm not so sure our current foreign policy decisions reflect this wisdom.

Just because you have the Mother of All Bombs at your disposal doesn't mean you should use it. Just because your enemy doesn't possess a bomb as big as yours doesn't mean he is incapable of retaliation. As we've learned, big bombs too often lead to tragic responses: airplanes flown into towers, trucks driven into crowds of pedestrians, individuals with guns taking lives in San Bernardino or Orlando. Frankly it is not just having the ability to plan ahead that matters; it is the spirit that guides us when we plan today for tomorrow that is crucial; it is the principles and values we embody as we live today preparing for tomorrow that make all the difference in the world.

A friend of mine, Cynthia Rigby, teaches at Austin Theological Seminary. She recently shared a story about attending her son's middle school band concert. The seventh and eighth graders did a great job on their recital. Cynthia was especially pleased with her son's fine work on the clarinet. After the last piece, she was ready to leave when the conductor, Ms. Crowley, turned around and said there would be one more part to this program. The band was playing in a competition next month in which they will be required to sight read a piece of music. They will be handed the music and have eight minutes to prepare before being asked to play it through. Ms. Crowley asked the guests to watch the band practice for this sight-reading event.

New music was handed out, which each student dutifully put on their music stand. Holding their instruments on their laps in a resting position, the young people focused entirely on Ms. Crowley sitting on her high conductor's stool. She opened the score on her stand and said, "OK, open your music and let's play." No one moved to put instruments to their lips. Nonetheless Ms. Crowley began to conduct, arms moving about, humming and gesturing, drawing the students into the piece. With instruments on their laps, the students' eyes darted back and forth from score to teacher. "*Here is the melody; careful—there's a B natural. Play up this crescendo. Watch me for the cut off. More passion—and now, measure 90, don't play B-flat! That's a natural again.*" Every student was focused. Without playing a note they were pulled into the music itself, a piece they'd never heard but which now was known to them. The eight-minute timer went off. Ms. Crowley stopped. She flipped back her score and now invited her students to make real the music they'd only heard before in their heads. She conducted again from the beginning as they made beautiful music together. Cynthia said the process surprisingly brought tears to her eyes. She saw the whole exercise as an example of grace.¹

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women disciples went to Jesus' tomb prepared with spices. They found the stone rolled away and Jesus' body missing from within. In that moment, there was no celebration—no glad tidings of great joy. There was confusion. They felt perplexed and afraid. Just then two

heavenly messengers appeared and flipped the script on them. *Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen.*

Were they prepared for this message? Maybe. They'd been told by Jesus that he would be killed and yet would re-build the temple of his body in three days.

They'd sensed when they were around Jesus that someone more than a prophet, more than John the Baptist was in their midst. They'd seen blind eyes opened.

They'd seen women healed and brought forward in a male-dominated world. And they'd been welcomed themselves, called his beloved, his disciples.

On that morning, they needed a guide, a conductor, if you will. The angels said in vs. 7, *Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day he would rise again?* Next comes the wonderful words of vs. 8: *Then they remembered his words.* They remembered even as they experienced something brand new. It was a new moment in their lives, in history even. They were sight-reading a new piece, as it were. But on a deeper, spiritual level, they already knew how it was supposed to go. It was all a surprising, tear-inducing act of creation and grace and love.

In Luke's gospel, no one commands the women to go and tell the other disciples. Why should they? These women were full disciples themselves! Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary and the others. They remembered Jesus' words spoken to them while he was alive, and now on their own initiative they went to the others with their good news that the one who was dead was alive again. At first they wouldn't believe. The script they'd learned—the song they'd played over and over again—was that the dead remain dead until rising at the Day of the Lord. But the women bravely gave them a new song to play. And everything changed for them and for us.

Too often you've been told in church that your life is a dress rehearsal for heaven. That life is a practice session for a much better concert yet to come. The problem is—that metaphor can make us feel like a Junior High band, with our borrowed instruments, our squeaky clarinet reeds and rental trombones, working our way through the pieces set before us until that great, gittin'-up morning when all we'll play is beautiful heavenly music. But life is not a dress rehearsal for heaven. The kingdom of God is in our midst. The famous theologian Paul Tillich said it best: *Resurrection happens now or it does not happen at all. It happens in us and around us, in soul and history, in nature and universe. Reconciliation, reunion, resurrection – this is the New Creation, the New Beginning. Accept it, enter into it, let it grasp you.*²

This is no rehearsal. This is the performance. The rituals—the baptism font, the communion table, the hymns sung since you were a child or learned today for the first time—it's all real. It's resurrection. It's a newness of life that challenges all the old ways of living and being and doing. Political bluster and bombs have no dominion today. Distractions and despair and doomsday predictions have no authority here. This is no longer the domain of the dead but the land of the living.

Remember Jesus' words. Remember Jesus' love. Remember Jesus' courage and tenacity and promise to be with us till the end of the age. Resurrection happens now or it doesn't happen at all. The women knew the truth of those words. So learn from them and go, tell the others: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

¹ Cynthia Rigby, "This Hour of Fire," Christianity & Culture, Journal of Austin Theological Seminary, 2017, p. 37–40.

² Paul Tillich, "The New Being", The New Being sermon collection, p. 24.