

## **“That Easter Feeling”**

*Matthew 28: 1-10*

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church  
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*Easter Sunday*

How does Easter feel to you this morning? An odd question, right? How do you suppose it felt to those women who went to the tomb as the day was dawning on that very first Easter? Would you not have liked to be there with them, to feel what they felt, to experience that earth-shaking, life transforming, history making moment?

You see, I have always believed that Easter ought to be a tremendous feeling, as much if not more so than a tremendous fact. Like that other high holy day for Christians which we call Christmas, Easter needs to be felt and experienced in order to be fully appreciated. As a result, it is never enough simply to hear the details of the Easter story or to affirm the resurrection as a doctrinal truth or a historical fact and surely it is both. But we could well know the details of the gospel accounts of the resurrection or be well versed in the theological and ethical dimensions of the resurrection and still not feel the continuing wonder and the fresh joy of an Easter faith.

Part of Easter’s problem for folks like us is that we are so familiar with the Easter story that it is difficult to hear it anew or to feel it afresh or to remain captivated by the mystery and miracle of it all. The poet W. S. Handley Jones expresses this well:

*“Too well, O Christ, we know thee; on our eyes  
There sits a film, through which we dimly see,  
Of frozen faith and stagnant memory.  
Thou art among us in the homely guise  
Of One whose nearness, like a shadow, lies  
Between our minds and His own mystery;  
And our familiar knowledge is to thee  
A second tomb, from which Thou dost not rise.”*

But God forbid that our familiarity with the Easter story should change this great good news into old stale news. God forbid that we lose the ability to feel as well as the ability to affirm the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why so often at Easter I look to the arts in an effort to recapture the feeling and not just the truth of Easter. For me, poetry, music and the visual arts have a way of expressing and evoking my emotions. They help me to get in touch with the feeling as well as the facts of the resurrection. So, if you are at all like me in this respect then please don’t rely on just the sermon to touch your emotions this Easter but plan to remain in the sanctuary or stay tuned through live-streaming for the “Hallelujah Chorus” from the Messiah as well as Widor’s Toccata on the organ.

Now the truth of the matter is that we Presbyterians are not very adept at recognizing, much less expressing, our emotions and feelings. In fact, sometimes we have been down right skeptical and suspicious of anything emotional — a sermon, a worship service, a hymn selection, a person, or an entire church. We are guilty of assuming that the more emotional a message is the less substance it might have, right?

There's the story of the preacher's wife who was reading his sermon manuscript for Sunday morning and noticed written in the margins at several places were the letters PWIV. "What does PWIV mean?" she asked. And he said, it stands for, "Point Weak, Increase Volume!"

In the Reformed family of faith, we preachers are not really trained to appeal to emotions. Our training is in rhetoric or homiletics, the art of interpretation, remembering that rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Most rhetoric ignores emotion completely. However, it was not always so. Centuries ago Aristotle taught that there are three ways to persuade people to do something apart from force — *ethos*, *logos*, *pathos*. *Ethos* refers to the character or the authority of the one speaking. Consequently, if you respect who I am or the knowledge that I have or if you value the personal book I am quoting, then I might be able to persuade you to do something.

*Logos* of course is the root word for logic. It also means word. Unquestionably this is our strong suit as Presbyterians. We are trained to be wordsmiths and to use logic as we appeal to reason and intellect. Presbyterians, therefore, have always insisted that their clergy and their laity be well educated, and we have insisted that the Christian faith be presented as reasonable, intelligent, and intellectually defensible. We like to think of ourselves as rational people and we want our faith to appeal to the educated and intelligent among us.

However, Aristotle's third means of persuasion was *pathos* and here we have an appeal to emotion, to passion and feeling if you will. And here too is where many Presbyterians become uncomfortable and begin to tune out with respect to further communication.

I am not sure why we do this, but I suspect that we are the poorer for it. Emotion bothers us perhaps because it is something we cannot contain or control. And yet, neither has this always been the posture even of Presbyterian throughout the ages with respect to the emotional dimension of life. Indeed, some of the greatest Presbyterians pulpits of former generations were noted for the passion and intensity and feeling exhibited from the pulpit. Oh yes, I know all the dangers of the emotion. Emotion can be manipulated and distorted, but the truth of the matter is that most of us rightly have a great deal of passion about any subject that has captured our hearts, about any subject or cause to which we are fervently committed, be it sports, politics, healthcare, the arts, justice or community issues. And I am convinced that if we divorce our feelings from our faith, our faith will be the poorer for it. We may then have a thoroughly sanitized but an infinitely boring spiritual life.

So, in today's Easter sermon, I am asking you — How does Easter feel to you this morning? Granted, it is a rather strange question from a modern-day Presbyterian preacher especially from an Interim Pastor, a "Rent-a-Rev" if you will. It would not be strange at all if I

asked, “What do you believe about Easter?” or “How do you understand and interpret the resurrection event?” or “What do you intend to do about the resurrection?” We are more accustomed to approaching the resurrection theologically and philosophically, analytically or ethically. We may even try to understand the resurrection in its historical context or its life situation. We may approach it medically or scientifically and ask what really happened two thousand years ago. But this morning, for a change, I am asking with respect to Easter: How does it feel?

As I was reflecting on this sermon, I heard on the radio what may be the signature song of my generation, the sixties generation. It may well be the defining song of that era. When it was recorded there was no sheet music available and it was suddenly created by some fellows in June 1965. There was that electric organ wailing in the back ground and stiletto-sharp spirals on the old guitar and a young man, twenty-four years old whining in that nasally and distinctive voice and barking our accusations in his unique style”

*“How does it feel  
How does it feel  
To be on your own  
With no direction home  
Like a complete unknown  
Like a rolling stone?”*

It seemed to me then and it seems to me now that Bob Dylan was addressing a person and a culture that at one time had had all of life’s advantages but now the tables had turned, and they too are among the outcasts, the despised and the destitute. So, Bob Dylan asks, how does it feel?

But this morning I have another rolling stone in mind and not the same one that Dylan immortalized. I am thinking of that stone rolled away from a garden tomb and how it felt on Easter to stand before it and hear an angel say: “He is not here. He has been raised.”

Now if you do not know or if you are curious to learn what Easter first felt like and what it might feel like today, then let me give you a couple of clues from scripture. When the two Mary’s, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, went to the sepulcher at dawn on Sunday and were told by the angel that Jesus had been raised from the dead and had gone before them into Galilee, we are told by Matthew in verse 8 of our morning lesson: “So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy...”

So how does Easter feel? First of all, it feels like fear! Matthew says the women “left quickly with fear.” Mark says they were “amazed” (16:5.) And Luke tells us they were “terrified” (24:5), but all the gospel writers are agreed that the resurrection was first of all frightening. The women who left the tomb were awe-struck and filled with wonder, astonishment and yes, fright! Dead men do not ordinarily come back to life and I am not sure how anyone could be emotionally equipped to handle such an eventuality.

Is it any wonder that the women left the tomb quickly? If I had arrived at church at dawn this morning and walked through the columbarium, only to discover that one of the crypts had been opened and an angel was sitting beside it calling my name and saying that the deceased had been raised and would meet me later, I am fully sure what I would have done, but I am rather sure I would not have hung around the burial site for very long. Like the two Mary's I would have been dumbfounded and terrified. Why? Because here would be an event beyond my human understanding, an experience that really defies rational explanation.

Now I for one think it would be good if we could actually recapture that holy fear, that sense of awe when it comes to the resurrection. I wish we too could peer as for the first time into an empty tomb, feel the goose bumps run up and down our spines, see the abandoned grave clothes and hear an angel call us by name and just have the living daylight scared out of us! The resurrection ought to scare us, my friends. If Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, then the whole world and everything in it has been turned upside down. If Jesus is risen from the dead and is present with us by his word and spirit — well this is simply awesome and terrifying. Friends if the resurrection does not frighten us just a bit, then frankly I wonder if we've ever truly felt it. You see, sometimes it causes us to tremble in fear.

A second thing that Easter felt like then and feels like now is joy, unadulterated, overflowing joy! "So, they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy..." Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are agreed in their accounts of the resurrection in that it caused overwhelming joy to flood the souls of the disciples. One of my very favorite passages in the resurrection accounts of the gospel can be found in *Luke 24:41*. The risen Lord had appeared to his startled and frightened disciples who think him to be a ghost and they can scarcely take in the fact that he is standing among them. And Luke says, "They disbelieved for joy and wondered." Isn't that a great phrase? "They disbelieved for joy and wondered." That is to say, here was news too good to be true, or at least that is how we would say it in our day. But the disciples "disbelieved for joy" because if what they were seeing was really true, their joy could not be contained.!

And why is that? Why does the resurrection evoke such joy? It does so because if Christ is risen from the dead, then the face of death has been forever changed; because if Christ is emerged victorious from the tomb, then so too has human hope emerged from the grave in which the world often places it; because if Christ has risen from the dead, then that means that God is stronger than Satan, that love is stronger than hatred, that life is stronger than death, and that goodness is more powerful than evil. If Christ is risen from the grave, then the life of Jesus Christ has been validated and vindicated and we can now see that life with purpose and power, with beauty and integrity is not in vain. If Christ is risen from the grave, then many stones can be rolled away from those cold tombs in which our better selves have for too long been buried. Talk about your joy! My friends, if Christ has risen from the grave it is the most joyous good news the world has ever heard.

So, Easter 2019; how does it feel? I hope that it feels a bit like fear and a great deal like joy. I wish I could adequately explain the resurrection to you, but all words are tentative and inadequate. But it is possible to feel even what you cannot fully articulate. For example, one

can feel love intensely but have no words to adequately articulate or explain the fact of that feeling. And my prayer for you and for me is that not only on this day but in all the days to come the Easter message and the resurrection of Jesus Christ will continue to frighten and amaze us and in doing so will transform our individual lives and all of life. It is also my prayer that it will flood our souls and profound joy.

There is an anonymous poem entitled, "Hope." It begins this way:

*He died!*

And with him perished all that men hold dear;  
Hope lay beside him in the sepulcher,  
Love grew corpse cold, and all things beautiful beside  
Died when he died.

But this poem concludes with these thrilling words:

*He rose!*

And with him hope arose, and life and light.  
Men said, "Not Christ but Death died yesternight"  
And joy and truth and all things virtuous  
Rose when he rose.