



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“EASTER: HOW DOES IT FEEL?”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 28:1-10

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, April 12, 2009.

How does to Easter feel to you this morning? 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 recapture 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 then 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. 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 expressed 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 this year, as in other years I turned to the arts in an effort to recapture a 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.

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 or assuming that the more emotional a message is the less substance it might have, right?

In the Reformed family of faith we preachers are not really trained to appeal to emotions. Our training is in rhetoric, remembering that rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Most rhetoric ignores emotion completely. However, 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 demanded that 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 articulate 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, this is not always been the posture of Presbyterian throughout the ages with respect to the emotional dimension of life. Indeed, some of the greatest Presbyterian pulpiters 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. 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 generations, the 60's 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 an old guitar and a young man, 24 years old whining in that distinctive voice and barking out 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. Now, Bob Dylan asks, how does it feel?

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 Marys, 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 tomb quickly? If I had arrived at church at dawn this morning and walked through the graveyard only to discover that one of the graves had been opened and an angel was sitting on the headstone calling my name and assuring that the deceased had been raised and would meet me later, I am fully sure what I would have done, but I am convinced I would not have hung around the graveyard for very long. Like the two Marys 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 daylighters 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.

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 & 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 life with purpose and power, with beauty and integrity. 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 2009; 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 with 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 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.