

April 20, 2014
God's Emotional Week

Overwhelmed on Easter!
Matthew 28:1-10

Opening words: There are 52 weeks every year. Each one is important and not a single one should be wasted. Have you every stopped to consider how many weeks have occurred in the history of the world? However, there is one week that changed our world forever, Holy Week! On the Christian calendar Holy Week is the last week of Lent, beginning on Palm Sunday and ending at dawn on Easter. It is the week the church remembers the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry.

This year I have been looking at the role emotions played in Holy Week. Mark Twain once said, "*Any emotion, if it is sincere, is involuntary.*" Just think about it for a moment. Emotions do play a large part in the Holy Week drama. The crowd was excited on Palm Sunday. The disciples were perplexed on Maundy Thursday. Those that loved Jesus were devastated on Good Friday. The believers were overwhelmed with joy on Easter. Each one of these emotions played a large part in the Holy Week drama.

This is Easter morning and the believers were overwhelmed with joy. Do you really blame them? They just couldn't believe what had happened. On Friday they were devastated with the fact that Jesus was dead. His death was not pretty. Jesus was crucified like a common criminal. The only thing left to do was accept their defeat. Then, everything suddenly changed. It was almost too good to be true. Jesus had come back to life and walked out of his tomb. When was the last time you were overwhelmed with joy? Have you ever been overwhelmed with joy? If you have, then you can relate to the Gospel lesson for this morning, Matthew 28:1-10. Let me call this message *Overwhelmed on Easter.*

Matthew 28:1-10 ¹After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. ² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. ⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." ⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

It is a scene I have seen countless times but it never gets old. This time it happened in a Chicago suburb on February 18, 2014. Chief Petty Officer Steven Jones hadn't seen his family for fourteen months because he had been serving in Afghanistan. His entire family missed him, including his nine year old daughter, Madison. Every night she prayed for him and asked God to send him home safely. That prayer was answered. It was just an ordinary day. Madison was in her school cafeteria surrounded by her friends. Then it happened. There was a commotion in the room, so she decided to look around and see what was happening. She saw something she didn't expect, her daddy! At first, she screamed. Then, she ran up to him and gave him a hug. There were no words exchanged because both were crying. Both were overwhelmed with joy. Madison was released from school early. She spent the day with her father. They spent that day watching the Little Mermaid together. I have to ask you this question. When was the last time you were overwhelmed with joy? At the very heart of this morning's Gospel lesson is overwhelming joy. Let's look at the story together.

We are in the twenty-eighth chapter of Matthew. To the logical mind the story is over. When we last left Jesus, he was dead. You remember, he was crucified on the cross like a common criminal. It looked like Satan had won. After all, death is final. But this is Easter and you know what happened. According to the text for today, it was Sunday morning. The Sabbath was over, so the law permitted people to touch the dead. Dealing with the dead was as upsetting to their generation as it is to ours. Matthew tells us two women, both named Mary, went to Jesus's tomb. Luke tells us they went to the tomb to treat his body with spices. It was their generation's way to embalm. One of the women was Mary Magdalene. She is considered the second most important woman in the New Testament, behind the mother of our Lord. She owed Jesus so much. Jesus had exorcised seven demons from her. (Luke 8:2) Her life would never be the same again. Her heart dictated that she go to Jesus's tomb on that day. I believe they went early to get a horrible task over with. As they walked to the tomb, they were completely heartbroken. They never expected what was going to happen next.

Verse two says there was a violent earthquake. According to Matthew, the earth shook at Jesus's death (Matthew 27:51, 54) and once again at his resurrection. It is God's way of reminding us that He is present. That should have been the first clue that something big had happened. Also, according to Matthew, an angel came down from heaven and rolled away the stone. That same angel, whose appearance was like lightning, told the women that Jesus had returned from the dead. The guards were numb with fear, but the women were overwhelmed with joy. They entered the tomb and looked at the spot where Jesus had been. Verse eight says, *"So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell the disciples."* The women were caught up in the moment. It was difficult for them to accept the fact that Jesus was dead. It must have been impossible for them to accept the fact that Jesus had returned from the dead. There was no way they could have completely understood the significance of the resurrection. However, the same thing can't be said of the early church.

They knew the significance of that historical moment. They knew the resurrection was the one thing that separated them from the rest of the world. They knew belief in the resurrection was not optional, it was indispensable. How important was the resurrection to the early church? Consider two facts with me. First, the early church abandoned Saturday worship for Sunday worship. Why? Because they wanted the people to remember the resurrection. We gather on Sunday morning because Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday morning. Every Sunday is a little Easter, a resurrection day. Second, the first creed in the early church illustrates for us the significance of the resurrection. It is found in Romans 10:9. It says, *"that if you confess with your mouth that 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* The resurrection was the core principle of the faith from the very beginning. If you didn't believe in the resurrection, then you weren't part of the church. The early church knew the significance of the resurrection. However, the same thing cannot be said of our time.

In our time the resurrection has been demoted. I am not sure why that has happened, but it has happened. People are more interested in good works than they are the resurrection. The problem is, you can't earn your salvation. People are more interested in political correctness, where all the world religions stand equal, than they are the resurrection. The problem is, Jesus is your only hope of salvation. If the resurrection isn't important to people, then Easter, Resurrection Day, isn't as important to people. The overwhelming joy of the women at the tomb has been replaced with a mild curiosity. Today, I am going to give you two reasons why you should be overwhelmed with joy on this Easter morning. One is a very public reason. The other is very private. So if you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

Public

One of my favorite places in the world is Washington DC. Kathryn and I would go annually to expose international students from Youngstown State University to our nation's capital. I really enjoyed those trips. The students were so bright, and I was proud to show off my country. We went to the same sites annually. We would go to Arlington, the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Memorial, the Vietnam War Memorial, the White House and the rest. It was great! One year, I got to a place that wasn't on the regular tour. I found the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. It is still a functioning church. It is not far from the White House. History tells us Abraham Lincoln would go there to hear the famous preachers of his day. Many Lincoln stories came from those sacred walls. This is one.

One Wednesday evening Lincoln attended that church to listen to a man named Dr. Gurley. Lincoln listened intently from the pastor's office so he would not generate any excitement among the crowd. After the service, Lincoln was walking back to the White House with an aide. The aide asked, "Mr. Lincoln, did you like the message this evening?" Lincoln responded, "It was powerful delivered and well thought out!"

The aide responded, "So, you liked it?" The President said, "No, he didn't ask us to do anything great!"

Jesus did not make that mistake. Jesus told people what to do and he challenged their priorities. He is doing the same thing today. Jesus tells us to refocus our lives. Stop being preoccupied with our wants and start being preoccupied with the needs of other people. That is why we are always collecting something for someone. That is why we always will. Charity is one of the great characteristics of the Christian faith. Charity is part of our national DNR. Even non-believers take great pride in caring for one another. Never underestimate the influence Christianity has had on our culture.

Several years ago, I was in St. Petersburg, Russia. In my time in the "Evil Empire", I have seen some amazing things. Some of you have been with Kathryn and me. However, on this particular trip I saw something new. I was standing in a grocery store and could not believe my eyes. It was near the end of the long aisle of vodka, near the fish chips. It was a plastic collection box with a slit in the top so people could make contributions. With all the time we had spent in Russia, this was the first time I saw a sense of community. All those years of communism taught the people one thing, trust no one and only care about yourself. It is a teaching that is just the opposite of Christianity. That collection box showed me that the influence of communism was fading and the influence of Christianity was growing. I like living in America for many reasons. One of the reasons is we have a sense of community. We care about one another. We help people who are in need. Who knows? Someday, I may need help. Christianity has influenced our entire culture. Without the resurrection, there would be no influence. If you are overwhelmed with joy because the resurrected Jesus has influenced our society, say, "**Amen!**" That is my public reason. This is my private reason.

Private

Tuesday was tax day. Annually, on April 15, you are required to submit your tax forms to our friends at the Internal Revenue Service. I filed some time back. As you know, everyone is required to claim all of their income. Part of my income is weddings and funeral honorariums. During 2013, I officiated at six weddings and 14 funerals. Most of those funerals were outside of this church. I officiate at those funerals for two reasons. First, life is expensive. Second, it is a way to get to know people outside of this church in the community.

I can honestly say no two funerals are the same. They are all different, but I end every funeral the same way. I offer the grieving a comforting word. Some of you have heard me say it. I say, someone once asked me, "What do you look forward to in your own death?" My answer is, "Being reunited with all my loved ones who have passed on." I conclude by saying the resurrection changed everything. Without the resurrection, when we die, it is over. However, with the resurrection, this is only a momentary separation. Who do you miss on this Easter morning?

Who do you long to be with again? You should be overwhelmed with joy on Easter morning because the resurrection means death has no hold on you. If those words comfort you, say, "**Amen!**" I have never met a person who didn't want to go to heaven.

On Monday afternoon, I went out to get a haircut. I didn't want to look bad on Pippa's big day. I don't want to shock you, but I am not real selective where I get my haircut. The cheaper the better. I signed in, and a few seconds later I was escorted back to my seat. The young woman introduced herself. Her name was Jessica or Tammy or something. She put the sheet on me and began to cut away. As she cut, she asked me a series of questions. She asked, "Are you ready for Easter?" I said, "I'm working on it." Then she asked, "Are you staying home for Easter?" I said, "No, we are going to eat out." Then, she asked, "Are you retired?" It was at that moment she began to irritate me. I said, "No, I have a job." I knew what was coming next. She asked, "So where do you work?" I almost felt sorry for the girl. I answered, "I am a minister." She suddenly got that "deer in the headlights" look. She struggled for the next question, so she simply said, "That must be very rewarding. Where is your church?" I said, "I am the pastor of the Western Reserve United Methodist Church." She said, "Where on Western Reserve Road is your church?" I tried to explain we aren't on Western Reserve Road. "We are on Canfield Road, about a mile from Cornersburg, on the bend, next to the house with the lake with all the geese." She said, "I know where you are." Then I asked her, "Where do you go to church?" She said, "I was raised Catholic, but I don't go to church anymore. I went to Catholic school for twelve years and never missed mass. I think I have church covered for the rest of my life." Then, she added, "I consider myself a good person and I do believe in God. Isn't that good enough?" I ruined her day when I answered, "No! Even Satan believes in God." For some reason, she stopped talking to me.

This is Easter morning, and on this day we remember one thing, the resurrection! The women in the text were overwhelmed with joy because Jesus was alive! The early church was overwhelmed with joy because they understood the significance of the resurrection. It separated them, and us, from the rest of the world. You should be overwhelmed with joy because it changed the way you are living today. Without the resurrection, there is no sense of community. Without the resurrection, there is no hope of eternal life. The resurrection changed everything. How overwhelmed with joy are you on this Easter morning?

Will you pray with me?