

He Is Not Here; He Is Risen
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
April 9, 2023 - Easter AM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
Matthew 28:1-10

The week before last, The Wall Street Journal released the results from a poll of American attitudes. This poll, taken in cooperation with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, was designed to measure the attitudes of Americans across multiple areas of well-being. The results were not great. By all measures Americans are in a funk. They are in a funk and they are getting funkier.

The results are especially discouraging when you compare them to attitudes just one generation ago. In 1998, Americans were asked these same questions and in some cases the responses were strikingly different. Here are some examples:

In 1998, 70% of Americans said patriotism is very important. In 2023 guess what the number was? 38%. Only 38% of Americans said that patriotism was very important. Down by almost half in a generation.

In 1998 62% of Americans said that religion was very important. A substantial majority. That number today? 38% A dwindling minority. That's a big change.

In 1998 59% of Americans thought that having children was very important. Now only 30% think that's true. That stat is bad enough, but it's worse for the people under 30, the ones who used to have most of the babies, for them the number is 23%.

In 1998 47% of Americans said that community involvement is very important – now only 27% think so.

Not everything is on a downward trend. The number of people who thought that money was very important went from 31 % in 1998, to 43% today. Oh Joy.

These numbers aren't great and maybe the worst thing about them is that they feel true. These numbers don't really surprise us because these numbers describe what we've been sensing. We have a feeling that people are becoming more cynical, less patient, more fearful, more angry. Maybe a broad way to describe what we've been feeling is that people are losing hope. Many of these attitudes measured in the survey depend on hope. Having children is an act of hope, you've got to believe your baby has a future. Patriotism requires a kind of hope; a belief in your country and its future. A desire to get involved in your community reflects a hopeful posture; I can change things! I can make a difference going forward. All these smaller individual measurements reflect the larger category of hope, and so the survey is telling us that hope is a scarce commodity these days. We've all been feeling it; now we have the data.

Well today is Easter. On Easter Sunday I want to share one more data point with you this morning. I would like to look at just one more data point that might help us measure our world. Here is my data point: Christ is risen! Forget about the Wall Street Journal survey for a second and forget about all those other surveys and their gloomy news. As you measure your days, as you measure your future, here's your most important data point: Christ is risen! Don't get me wrong: all those surveys have their place and their uses, but when it comes to our foundation, when it comes to what underlies our moods and our actions as Christians, there is one data point by which we Christians measure life: He is not here, he is risen!

If you think I'm being naive, let's go back to our passage and that first Easter morning. If Gallup could have done a survey on that morning the women came to the tomb, what would the trend lines look like? Human hope wasn't just in decline, human hopes were gone, kaput, bankrupt. From the perspective of Jesus' followers, it looked like the game was over. They had seen the religious leaders turn against their master. The people who were supposed to be experts on God things had rejected Jesus. They had seen the political powers turn against Jesus. The armies of Rome had seized him and given him a full dose of their cruelty. The tide of popular opinion had turned against Jesus; the crowds who used to follow him everywhere were now calling for his crucifixion. And his closest friends had failed him; they'd promised to stick with him, but when the chips were down they folded and fled.

And then on top of all that they'd see the horror of the cross! They'd heard Jesus groaning, they'd heard his wail of abandonment, they'd seen his battered body go slack. As far as any of Jesus' followers was concerned that was it. It was so beautiful while it lasted, and at the peak of the thing their hopes were so high, but now their hopes weren't just trending down they were gone. Their hopes died and were sealed in the grave with Jesus.

But those hopes were human hopes. Those were human attitudes, based on human optimism and human plans. Now that the field has been completely cleared of human hopes, God plants a hope that human moods and trends can't trust because it's not rooted in people it's rooted in Him! Economic trends don't affect this hope. Rising tensions between races and classes can't break this hope. Military power can knock a city down and bring complete devastation, but military power can't touch this hope. The results of your last blood test, your Pet scan your MRI are powerless against this hope. Your moods may waver, you may be up and down on waves of fear and doubt, but your moods cannot undermine the power of this hope. The grave is empty. Christ is risen. God is making everything new. There's nothing you can do to stop it. That's the first bit of Easter good news I want you to see and feel and know this morning. God has given us a hope anchored in heaven that no human power can stop and no human trend can touch.

There's a second bit of good news I want to share. In this passage God doesn't just plant Easter hope; he plants Easter joy. Where do we see that? Well, you heard my children's sermon. I love the angel in this passage. This angel has attitude. Sitting up there on the stone with a twinkle in his eye. "Good morning Ladies, can I help you? Are you looking for someone? He is not here; he is risen!" I know most of you haven't read The Lord of the Rings books, but for those of you who have, sitting up there on that stone, the angel reminds me of Tom Bombadil. 'Hey now, ho now, death you're no big deal.' When the angel sits on the stone to deliver his message, the Holy Spirit injects joy into the story, a sense of playful hope.

I think Jesus does the same thing in verse 9. Look at the way he greets the women. In the Greek he meets them and he says, 'Charein' which is translated as "Greetings!" According to Dale Bruner and others, this is the common marketplace greeting you give someone when you run into them on the street. I think it's a little bit cheeky of Jesus to greet them this way. Imagine you were meeting someone in a context where you knew they would be surprised. You fly across the country to see your Grandma but you don't tell her you are coming. And then you get an Uber to her house and just walk right into her kitchen and for your greeting you casually say, "Hey Grandma! How's it goin'" That would be cheeky of you. That would be playful. You would be having fun with Grandma. It would be a way to amplify the joy of the moment. I think Jesus is doing a little of that here with his, "Greetings!"

With their playfulness, both Jesus and the angel are sending little sparks of joy into the despair of these women. And notice the source of that joy. It comes from heavenly places and heavenly agents. It comes from Jesus and the angel. Just like the hope, it's not a human thing. It's Easter joy, a joy that can't be destroyed by human moods and human trends. And you can see those sparks of joy start to light up these women. They come to the tomb empty and afraid, but by verse 7 the fear is there, but now they are filled with fear and joy. Easter Joy is starting to infect them!

Soon that joy will infect the whole church. In the early church you find this remarkable Spirit-filled people who are able to be hopeful and joyful even when all the circumstances of their life point in the opposite direction. So in the early days of the church there's persecution. Peter and some of the other apostles are arrested and thrown in jail for preaching about Jesus. They are threatened with death. They are flogged, beaten and told never to talk about Jesus again. Not only do they keep talking about Jesus, "they rejoice because they had been counted worthy of suffering for the name." They rejoiced in their suffering! Did they like being imprisoned and flogged? No. Did the prospect of being flogged scare them? Probably. It would scare me. But in the face of all that they stayed hopeful and joyful because the joy wasn't based on human circumstances but on God's work of resurrection.

Later in Acts, Paul and Silas are thrown into a Philippian dungeon for doing God's work. They face a trial and beatings and possibly worse. And yet in the middle of the night, when they are locked in deepest part of that dungeon what do they do? They sing hymns. They sing hymns of hope and joy. And the whole prison hears them. Were they scared in that prison? I'm sure they were. Were they worried about that they might die? I'm sure they were. But their mood and their action wasn't ruled by those earthly things; they lived out of the hope and joy of God's resurrection. And their joy was infectious. In this world of terrible statistics and general

grouchiness, how much do we need a community of Easter hope and Easter joy? We really need this kind of community. And in this world of terrible statistics and persistent gloom how brightly would such a community shine? It would shine like an Easter morning sunrise.

Earlier in this sermon I mentioned all those polls which show how our society is getting more hopeless and pessimistic about the future and about the state of our world. We said that's not just something you see in polls; that's something you can feel in the daily interactions of life. And I said, the only data point that matters to us is Christ is Risen! Maybe that sounded a little glib. Maybe you thought, that sounds good in a sermon, but what about actual real world problems. If I'm dealing with child poverty; if I'm trying to manage the addiction of someone I love; if I'm seeing my grandchildren walk away from their faith, what am I supposed to do? Do I just say 'Christ is risen' over and over again? How does that help me?

Well of course you are partly right. Just saying, 'Jesus is risen' doesn't solve poverty or end addiction or destroy unbelief. We need to fight those things using the full capacities of our minds and our hearts and our hands, and doing so will mean paying close attention to trends and working towards real world policies and solutions. What the resurrection does do for you is give you the hope to keep working on these problems even when everyone else says it's hopeless. Saying, "Christ is risen" doesn't end your child's addiction, but it gives you hope even after he's fallen off the wagon for the umpteenth time. Saying, "Christ is risen" doesn't magically end child poverty but it does keep you volunteering at the pantry even when progress is slow and the work seems endless. Saying, "Christ is Risen" doesn't magically end all the troubling trends in the American church especially in the younger generations, but it does keep you from giving up and losing heart because you know that, no matter how things look, faith, hope and love will triumph in this world.

Through Tim Keller, I heard a eulogy given by a pastor named Jonathan Evans at the funeral of his mother, and I thought it was a pretty good example of hope in the trenches of everyday life. Jonathan's father is Tony Evans, the well-known Evangelical pastor, maybe some of you have heard of him. Back in early 2020 Tony's wife Lois, Jonathan's Mother, died after a long and difficult fight against cancer. She died even though many people had been praying hard and long for her healing.

At her funeral Jonathan got up and admitted he had been wrestling with God over his Mother's loss. 'God this would have been such a good opportunity to show your glory. If you had healed her it would have been such a witness. Where were you God? Why didn't you answer?' Eventually Mr. Evans felt like God gave him his answer. He felt as if God said to him, "Jonathan, I did answer your prayer, there were always two answers to your prayer. Either your mother was going to be healed or she was going to be Healed. Either she was going to live or she was going to Live. Either she was going to be with family or she was going to be with Family. Either she would be taken care of, or she would be Taken Care of. Victory belongs to me."

That's a pretty good picture of what Christian hope looks like in the middle of the struggle. It's a hope that cancer and death and depressing poll numbers can't touch. It's a hope that flows straight out of the empty tomb. It's the hope I proclaim to you this morning: "Christ is Risen, people. Alleluia." ©Rev. Peter Jonker