Revelation 1:17-18 *Resurrection Sunday, 2020: Jesus is Alive! Today!*

***Who’s Minding the Store***Back in 2009 Lifeway Christian Research did a massive survey to gauge when people were most open to considering matters of faith. They found there are five life events during which people are most open to discussions of spiritual matters. The top 5 were, in order:

**1. The Christmas season (47%)
2. The Easter season (38%)
3. After a major national crisis (38%)
4. After a natural disaster (34%)
5. Following the birth of a baby (28%)**

This particular week then, you could say that we are ticking 3 of those 5 boxes (and if you’ve recently had a baby, you must really be searching for God!)

Under normal circumstances, we would have a very full church today. And these are not normal circumstances. I would imagine that—if it were possible—church buildings would be stuffed this morning. We are in a season of unprecedented disruption. This week saw approximately 2000 deaths per day in the U.S. from Covid-19. Hospitals and nursing homes in certain areas are being taxed to capacity. More than that, the last three weeks have seen more unemployment claims than any other three-week period in our nation’s history. Americans have adapted to school closures and work-at-home arrangements in remarkable ways; but we have no real idea how long this will last. 3 more weeks? 3 more months? We don’t know.

Life right now is as complex and uncertain as any period in my lifetime. I would imagine there are a lot of people who are looking for God, turning back to faith. If we could, I imagine we’d fill our sanctuaries today looking for hope. Asking questions like: "Who's minding the store? Is there any power beyond our own feeble efforts that can control the events of today? Is anyone in charge?"

Ironically, we cannot gather in church to ask those questions. But even though it looks different this year, Easter has not been cancelled. Our inability to gather in a church sanctuary does not change the good news of the story. And the good news of Easter that we need to hear is that Jesus is alive! Today! Right now!

Easter is not just a celebration that Jesus rose from the dead some 2000 years ago; it’s a celebration that Jesus remains alive today. Jesus is alive, and He is minding the store.

***A Current Picture of Jesus***For my Bible text this morning, I’ve chosen a passage from the book of Revelation. Revelation chapter 1. I think of this passage as a current picture of Jesus.

Most of us, when we think of Jesus, have images in mind from His life on earth. Some of us, like Ricky Bobby in the move *Talladega Nights*, like to picture Jesus at His birth. We have an image of Jesus as a tiny infant, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid carefully in a manger. Others think of Him during his ministry, teaching to crowds and working miracles and welcoming children into His arms. Others—especially at this time of year—picture Jesus in His passion, hanging on a cross with a crown of thorns upon His brow.

Each of these images of Jesus—and many others—are appropriate and teach us something important about Him. But they also have one major shortcoming: they are all pictures of the past. They picture Jesus as He was, when He walked the earth, but they do not portray Him as He is now.

This passage in Revelation 1 is one of the best pictures we can get of Jesus as He is now: the resurrected and ascended Savior in heaven. Still alive, still in charge, more glorious than we can really imagine.

**Let’s read Revelation 1:9-18:**

**9**I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. **10**On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, **11**which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

**12**I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, **13**and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. **14**The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. **15**His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. **16**In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

**17**When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. **18**I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

The language of Revelation is filled with metaphor and symbolism, so none of this is supposed to be taken in a strictly literal sense. I love the images that are applied to Jesus here, though, and I love to teach through them—hair white as wool, eyes like blazing fire, a voice like the sound of rushing waters--these are powerful images that remind us that Jesus is majestic and glorious and true. But my focus today is going to be on verses 17 and 18. Here’s where we can see how the good news of Easter still applies to us today.

***Do Not Be Afraid***Let’s start at **verse 17**. John gets this heavenly vision of Jesus and his first instinct is to fall dead at His feet. Jesus reaches out his hand and says: “Do not be afraid.”

“Do not be afraid” is a phrase that gets repeated throughout Jesus’ life. It’s what the angels said to the shepherds on the night of Jesus’ birth. It’s what Jesus said to the disciples when their boat was caught on the lake in the middle of the storm. More significantly: it’s the first thing the angels said to the women who came to find Jesus’ tomb empty that first Easter morning. There is something about Jesus’ presence—and especially something about Jesus’ resurrection—that should fill us with courage.

What Jesus means here in Revelation is, first of all: “Don’t be afraid of me.”

Because John was afraid.

Seeing the Lord Jesus in all His heavenly glory was a frightening sight. One of the reasons Revelation uses so much metaphor and symbolism is because there really is no earthly language that can adequately describe what it looks like when a mortal being gets a glimpse of the immortal God. All the prophets and apostles and saints who in the Bible have gotten just a glimpse of God’s glory have responded by falling down in fear and trembling before Him.

Jesus reassures John, saying, "Don't be afraid." By this he means that God is our friend, not our enemy; He is for us, not against us.

But in another sense, in a big picture sense, I think Jesus is saying that we don’t need to be afraid of the disruptions and uncertainties of this world. For John it was suffering and imprisonment and persecution. For us, it is Covid-19 and unemployment and lost opportunities. Into this world of trouble Jesus is saying we don’t have to be afraid.

And then He gives three reasons we can take courage:

***The Beginning, the End, and Everything in Between***First, the glorious Christ says that we do not need to be afraid because: “**I am the First and the Last.”** Jesus is eternal. He has always been. He always will be. And He’s with us always.

The expression Jesus uses here comes from Isaiah 44:6: “This is what the Lord says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”

In other words, since everything comes from God and nothing will outlast God, therefore God has no final competitors. "Besides me there is no god!" God has the first word and the last word in history. All other attempts to have the last word will fail.

By quoting this line, Jesus is claiming to be God. He is claiming to be equal with His Father. But, more than that, He is claiming an attribute that is true of God alone: eternity. Jesus is claiming that He Himself has no beginning, and no end.

Another way of expressing of this that is repeated frequently in Revelation is the phrase: “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Those are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Sort of the Greek equivalent of A and Z.

If Christ is the Alpha, the first, then that means He was there at the beginning. That He precedes all others and that nothing exists that He was not there to witness it snapping into place.

And if Christ is the Omega, the last, that means He will be there at the end. When history winds down and comes to its ultimate conclusion, He will still be standing. Nothing will outlast Him.

But this expression also implies that Christ is there for everything in between. Alpha through Omega. A through Z. The whole alphabet belongs to Him, if you will.

And that means, right now, Jesus is alive and ruling and watching over things.

If you picture all of history as a timeline marked with the letters of the alphabet, then right now we are somewhere in between A and Z. Nobody knows for sure how close we are to Z, but we are somewhere on that timeline. And so is Jesus. It all belongs to Him. And He is with us.

Just before Jesus ascended back into heaven following the resurrection, He told His followers to go into all the world and share the gospel. Then He said: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matt. 28:20) Earlier, He told them that wherever two or three are gathered together in His name He would be with them.

And I don’t think He was trying to imply He would only show up when there are two of us, but that He is with all of His children, all of the time.

I read a story this week about a group known as the Scottish Covenantors in the 16th century. This was the days of the Reformation when religious beliefs were often influenced by politics; and if your beliefs didn’t match up with whoever held power at the moment you were in great danger. So these Scottish Covenantors were being scattered by persecution, and one congregation was told by its pastor that they had to flee and hide. They would not be gathering together for quite some time. But he told them

**"If there be one of you, He will be the second;
and if there be two of you, He will be the third,
and you will never lack for company."**

That promise has undergirded and sustained the faith of millions of people who, in sorrow or disappointment or heartache or problem or pressure, have felt that everyone had left them. Likewise, even now, as we isolate at home and we forgo the joy of meeting and worshipping together: We are not alone; the Lord is with us. You will never lack for company.

He is the first, and He is the last, and He is everything in between.

***The Living One***Second, the glorious Christ says that we do not need to be afraid because: **“I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!”** Jesus is the Resurrected One. This is what we celebrate today. Today is all about marking the day that Jesus came back from the dead.

Jesus was dead. You have to understand that. Jesus was betrayed by His friend Judas, arrested by a mob of angry Jewish leaders, and brought to trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. When Pilate found no fault with Him, he tried to have Jesus beaten and set free; but the angry Jewish crowd would not stand for it. They insisted that Jesus was challenging the authority of Caesar and they shamed Pilate into pronouncing the sentence of death. Then Jesus was handed over to professional executioners who scourged Him to within an inch of His life; forced Him to carry a cross to the Place of the Skull; and then hung Him on that same cross and left Him to die. Before they took Him down from the cross, they ran a spear through His side and into His heart.

Jesus was dead. He was killed by people who were good at killing. They didn’t make a mistake.

But now, look! He is alive again! On the third day after His death His friends went to His tomb to pay their respects. But the tomb was empty! Angles met His friends to announce the resurrection, and before the day was out He had appeared to and spoken with Mary Magdalene, the Apostle Peter, Cleopas and Cleopas’s companion, and the rest of the 12. Within the next forty days He appeared to at least 500 other witnesses. Jesus was dead, but He was raised from the dead.

And, more than that, He is alive for ever and ever. It’s not just that He walked out His tomb on that First Easter morning, but He continues to live today. As the Apostle’s Creed puts it, Jesus is—right now—“seated at the right hand of God the Father in heaven.” Of all the world’s major religions, only Christianity has the audacity to claim that its founder is still alive.

The Living One. The One who was dead. The One who is alive for ever and ever! That’s Jesus. And it’s just as true today as it was last Sunday. Just as true as it will be next week, and the week after that, and one year from now, and fifty years from now.

In a play called “The Trial of Jesus” by John Masefield, the centurion Longinus reports to Pontius Pilate after standing duty next to Jesus’ dying body. Pilate’s wife, (you remember her, she warned Pilate to let Jesus go) was listening in the room next door. When Longinus finishes his report to her husband, she summons the guard to her chamber and asks... “Is he dead…is he finally dead…do you think he is dead?” Longinus answers. “No, my lady, I don’t.” “Then where is he?” she demands to know. “Let loose in the world, Lady, let loose in the world…”

Jesus is alive and loose in the world. Every Sunday, then, is Easter Sunday. Every day is an opportunity to celebrate the one who was dead and is alive for ever and ever.

***The Keys***Third, the glorious Christ says we do not need to be afraid because: “**I hold the keys of death and Hades.”** Here’s the really good news. Because of what Jesus did on that first Easter Sunday, because of His defeat of death, He now holds the keys of death in His hand.

The Bible describes what happened when Jesus died as a sort of raid into enemy territory. Our greatest enemy is sin. And sin’s greatest power over us is the curse of death. Satan, God’s enemy and ours, uses that threat of death to frighten us and enslave us to all sorts selfish and godless behavior. Those are our enemies: sin, death, and Satan.

When Christ died, then, it was a raid into enemy territory. He took on the curse of sin and death, and rose again triumphantly. In so doing, He disarmed them of their power (Col. 2:15; 1 Cor. 15:55-56).

Jesus has entered the “House of Death” and came out holding the keys in his hand. Dr. W. A. Criswell, in a sermon on this verse said this:

When they nailed his feet to the tree, and when they nailed his hands to the wood, and when he entered into the dark gloom of the grave, there did he trample down forever the kingdom of death. And when he arose triumphant from it, he carried death as a captive chained to his chariot wheels. (quoted by Pritchard)

I like that picture—death chained to the chariot wheels of Jesus. Our Lord could not have conquered death unless he fully entered into every dark part of the kingdom of death. Only then could he emerge victorious with the “keys” in his hand.

Ray Pritchard puts it like this:

*When Jesus died, something stupendous happened in the spiritual realm*. Although it was invisible to the naked eye, it was seen by all the angels and the Old Testament saints. They watched as Jesus, like some conquering Old West hero, entered the infernal regions and disarmed the “bad guys” one by one. Then he marched them in full view of his Heavenly Father so that every created being would know that he had won the victory. (<http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2004-04-04-The-Strangest-Part-of-the-Creed-He-Descended-into-Hell/>)

All the enemies of Christ have been defeated. They remain on the battlefield, but the end is already written. We know how the story ends. Jesus wins—and we win with him. The devil cannot defeat us because we are united with the Ultimate Champion—the Lord Jesus Christ.

I love this story from Charles Spurgeon, the great London preacher of the 1800s:

He said that one night he woke up to find his bed violently shaking. Disturbed, he looked out his window and up at the sky, only to see the stars shining brightly. It was not a thunderstorm that had awakened him.

So he looked out his window and down at the neighboring buildings, but they were still. It was not an earthquake that was shaking his bed.

So then he look at the foot of his bed, where he saw the devil himself grinning diabolically and shaking his bed with great vigor. The smell of sulfur hung in the air. The fires of Hell seemed to glow off the devil’s body. He had been awoken by the Satan himself, shaking Spurgeon’s world.

At this point, Spurgeon says he simply shrugged his shoulders, said: “Oh, it’s only you”, and rolled over and went back to sleep.

That is exactly the attitude every Christian should have. Because of Jesus, the devil--and hell-can no longer hurt us. Jesus holds the keys to death and hades in His hands.

The world is topsy-turvy today. We are in a period of unprecedented disruption. People all over the world are asking who’s in control. Who’s minding the store?

The good news of Easter is that Jesus is alive! Today! Right now. Not just that He walked out of His tomb all those years ago, but that He remains alive today.

And He is the First and the Last. He was there at the beginning, He will be there at the end, and He’s with us every step of the in between.

And He is the Living One. He was dead, but now He’s alive. He’s alive and set loose in the world.

And He holds the keys. He’s minding the store. He hasn’t stepped away. He hasn’t lost control. We don’t need to be afraid!