

Still Undeclared

Revelation 1:4-18 (NIV)

⁴ John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. ⁷ “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen. ⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” 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.

Easter Sunday was our turning point, the moment when it became clear that Christ was victorious over death – and not just for himself, but for all people! Death will be destroyed because Jesus is the firstborn from the dead. Over 500 people saw the resurrected and living Lord Jesus, nail marks and all. People have to believe now. They have to believe us when we preach that Jesus has paid for all their sins and that we will get to live with him in heaven forever. The Church should now just snowball and get larger and larger, like we saw last Sunday! Evangelism will be so easy. Who can reject this?!

When preparing to celebrate Easter here, we added chairs to our sanctuary, and it was a literal full house. I think I only saw one or two chairs in here that were unoccupied. That was awesome! With just this congregation, over 126 people got to hear that turning point message of Jesus defeating death for us. But when you got here today, were you disappointed? How many returned this Sunday to continue to be built up in that Easter victory? Why hasn’t the snowball effect taken place? Why did I ask some of our members to remove the extra chairs from the sanctuary as soon as the Easter service was over? Has reality set in that even though we have a life-changing message - the victoriously resurrected Christ who is the total and complete package for our forgiveness, our completeness, our forever eternal life - we accept that a number of people who came for Easter we probably won’t see again?

Maybe you’re struggling with your own Easter evangelism setbacks. You plucked up the courage to articulate and share your faith and your hope based on the events of Easter. You gave that postcard to friends to share with them that they are undefeated by sin and death. You invited your family to come and hear this life-changing message. But they didn’t come. They politely listened but took no action. Easter happened, yet many people go on with their lives as if nothing has changed. Was this really a turning point?

When the women came back from the empty tomb and from seeing and touching the resurrected Jesus and reported this to the apostles, the 11 remaining close disciples of Jesus did not immediately believe. Even after running to the tomb and finding it empty with the strips of the burial cloth lying neatly there, Peter and John still wondered what had happened. That first Easter evening they cowered behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders. When 10 of the 11 had the resurrected Jesus appear to them on that first Easter Sunday evening and they told Thomas, who wasn’t with them, Thomas said, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25b) Right away, the Easter message of the resurrected Jesus was met with disbelief and skepticism by those who should believe.

The rejection continued. Months later, after they had seen and believed that Christ rose from the dead, the apostles boldly preached in the temple courts of Jerusalem that the risen Christ had forgiven all their sins and given them a new, perfect life in him through the Holy Spirit. And they were thrown in jail for it and given strict orders not to preach in this name. Decades later, the Apostle John, when he was the only surviving member of the 12 apostles, was exiled to an island called Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus,” (verse 9) the truth of what it means that Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. For preaching the Easter message, John was cut off from his fellow believers.

Easter was the turning point, right? This is what our faith is built on, why it's worth believing in all this Jesus stuff. The resurrected Jesus clearly showed himself to hundreds of people to assure them that our sins are paid for. Why are people not believing what the apostles saw with their own eyes, coming to faith in droves? Why were they still rejecting what was verifiably true? How many of the apostles had days where they wondered if Jesus being raised from the dead actually made a difference, that they were undefeated with the Lord? Did Jesus' resurrection change anything in this world or not?

While the apostles were still wondering in the locked room what the women's reports of the empty tomb and seeing and touching Jesus come back from the dead, Jesus himself came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:19b) He showed them his hands and side, showed them that his crucifixion had actually taken place, that he really was alive now. He gave them peace. Peace knowing that Jesus' payment for their sins - for their sins of deserting him, their sins of losing hope, their sins for not believing that he told them that he would rise from the dead. They were forgiven and now they were to give that same peace of total and complete forgiveness to other people. Jesus even came back personally for Thomas a week later so that Thomas could see with his own eyes and touch with his own fingers, that he would know that he too was personally forgiven and now could share the peace of forgiveness with other people. With this peace, they left that locked room and shared the risen Christ with others.

When the apostles were locked in jail, an angel of the Lord came during the night, opened the doors of the jail, and brought them out. He told them to keep preaching that peace of forgiveness from the risen Christ. "Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people all about this new life." (Acts 5:20) And they did just that. When reminded of the strict orders not to teach in this name of the risen Jesus, they all responded: "We must obey God rather than human beings!" (Acts 5:29) They were going to keep preaching this peace, this message of new life of forgiveness and perfection gifted by the risen Christ.

John, although cut off from his brothers and sisters in Christ on the island of Patmos, Jesus came to personally to him in a vision, a powerful vision, one that caused John to faint. But God didn't leave John there in that state. Jesus placed his powerful, mighty right hand on John and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 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." (verses 17-18) Jesus brought John peace and power. The turning point did indeed take place. Death was and is still conquered. You are still forgiven. Write this message down and pass on this peace to your people, that they would know that they are still forgiven, still undefeated because Christ is risen; he is risen indeed. Alleluia!

We gather here today the Sunday after Easter to be reminded and strengthened in the fact that yes, Easter really did happen, and yes, it really was the turning point that we have built our lives on. John encourages us with these words that were intended for Christians to gather around in a congregation and hear read. "To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." (verses 4-6)

Despite any and all the setbacks, we have God's underserved love, his grace. He had no reason to love us, but he did. He served us with his love by living that whole complete perfect life for us all 33 years he was here on earth. He suffered the full and complete punishment of our sins with his suffering and death on the cross; it is finished! Because his grace led him to do these things, we have peace with God. The resurrected Christ stands as a testament to the fact that we are completely and totally forgiven. Our sins have been removed. The hostility between us and God is ended by the work of the risen Christ. Since God has loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood, we belong to him.

On top of that, he has also made us – all of us – to be his priests to serve him, serve him by sharing this turning point, this grace, this peace, this forgiveness, this love, this freedom of Easter with others. As we do so, our unchangeable God reminds us that he is faithful to his Word. The Easter message won't fail, won't change, no matter how many setbacks we experience.

The risen Christ is the ruler of the kings of the earth. No matter how bad it gets in this world, no matter how much violence and suffering and persecution comes our way because we proclaim and share the risen Christ with others, Jesus is in control. His powerful right hand touches our shoulders, like he did for John. He tells us, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. 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." (verses 17-18) The risen Christ is on our side and still stands undefeated. As we stand with him, we too are still undefeated. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.