Jesus' Easter Sermon

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
April 20, 2025 AM Sermon
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Revelation 2:8-11

I'm going to be preaching on a slightly unusual text this Easter morning. I will be reading one of the seven letters to the seven churches from the beginning of the book of Revelation. Revelation is an account of a vision that God gives to John, but it's a vision for 7 churches in Asia Minor – modern day Turkey.

The beginning of this vision has a distinctly Easter flavor. The first thing John sees in Revelation 1 is a vision of the risen Jesus and it's the risen Jesus in his full power and glory. John tells us that his eyes were like fire and his face shone like the sun and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. Jesus says to John, "Don't be afraid. I am the first and the last! I am the living one. I was dead, but now look: I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys to death and Hades!" It's a proclamation of the resurrection. Jesus appears and says, 'don't be afraid! I'm alive.'

After revealing his glory, the first thing Jesus does is deliver a message to each of the churches. He has a little sermon for each of the seven churches. The message that Jesus has for the church in Smyrna is an Easter message. Jesus preaches them an Easter sermon! If that's right, if this is Jesus' Easter sermon, that would make this the perfect text for our Easter morning. So, let's hear Jesus' Easter sermon. As I read, ask yourself this question: What is life like for the people in the Smyrna church? Are the times good, bad, hard, easy? What do you sense from the letter? Read Revelation 2:8-11

So, are things hard or easy in Smyrna? I think it's pretty obvious that the church in Smyrna is going through some tough times. When Jesus talks to the Smyrnan church he refers to afflictions and poverty, persecutions and imprisonment. We even hear about the possibility that some members of the church might have to give up their life for their beliefs.

Why is there so much trouble? Let me try to fill in the picture. John had the vision of Revelation during a time when things were starting to get hard for the churches. The tide was turning against Christians. Here's how that probably looked in Smyrna. In those days, Smyrna was a wealthy town, full of trade guilds and merchants. Smyrna was also a very patriotic Roman town, loyal to the empire. There were statues and monuments to the glory of Rome all through the city. That loyalty to Rome had a religious dimension. As scholar GK Beale has written, "aspects of the Imperial cult had infiltrated virtually every aspect of city life …so that individuals could aspire to economic prosperity and greater social standing only by participating to some degree in the Roman cult." In other words, if you wanted to be accepted, you had to worship the glory of Rome.

What did worshiping the glory of Rome look like? Well, just like in our world, the Smyrnans had regular cycles of holidays and feasts within the cycle of a regular year. On those holidays, people would get together and share meals together and hold celebrations. They'd eat and drink and have a good time. During those celebrations people would also make displays of their patriotic loyalty to Rome. As part of the festivities, you were expected to make an offering of incense to the emperor; you were expected to go into one of the temples where there would be a big statue of Caesar, and you were supposed to throw a little incense into the fire that burned in front of his image as a way to show your loyalty. You were expected to join the crowd when they bowed down and said, "Caesar is Lord." If you didn't burn the incense, if you didn't say 'Caesar is Lord," you were unpatriotic and probably couldn't be trusted.

Well, guess what. The members of the Smyrna Christian Reformed Church wouldn't participate in the empire worship. And for a while it was OK because everyone thought they were Jews. The Jews had been in Smyrna for much longer than the Christians and they had been given an exemption from burning incense to the emperor. And so, early on, when the Christians didn't offer incense either, the people of Smyrna thought that the Christians were also Jews. But as the time went on, relations between Jews and Christians

deteriorated. So lately the synagogue members had been saying, “Hey! those people aren’t Jews! They’re not part of our people! They don’t have the exemption from emperor worship!” That’s what all the talk of the synagogue of Satan is about.

And so, the town of Smyrna had turned against the Christians. “Who are these people who don’t love our empire!? Who are these people who won’t say ‘Caesar is Lord!?’ We don’t trust them!” Christians are gradually shut out of the economic and cultural life of the community. Townspeople stayed away from their businesses and wouldn’t trade with them. Things got pretty ugly. That’s why, in his message to them, Jesus refers to poverty and persecution and even the possibility of death.

But now, in the midst of their poverty, persecution and death, the risen Jesus comes to the people of Smyrna with a message. In the middle of their struggle Jesus comes to them with his face shining like the sun, his eyes like fire, his voice sounding like the rushing of many waters. Jesus comes to them and he preaches an Easter sermon. He preaches them an Easter sermon they will never forget. “I have risen!” “These are the words of him who is the first and the last, who died and came to life again.” “I have risen!” “So don’t be scared of these people who are threatening you! Don’t be afraid of these people who are accusing you! Because even if your struggle should end in death, even that death can’t hurt you because I am the living one and I hold the keys to death and Hades! Stay faithful, good people, because death can’t hurt you.” Mediated through John, the poor, beat-down church in Smyrna gets to hear a powerful Easter sermon delivered by the risen Jesus himself, brought straight from the courts of heaven.

As I thought about what Jesus says to the Smyrnans, it seems to me that in his Easter sermon Jesus is doing what every good Easter sermon does: he is giving his congregation night vision goggles. Soldiers and hunters and other folks use night vision goggles to see in the dark. When you walk through a dark forest with only your regular eyes, everything is dark and spooky. Put on night vision goggles and all sorts of things that you couldn’t see before suddenly become clear.

In their current situation, everything seems dark and hopeless for the Smyrnans; everything looks like death. But Jesus’ sermon gives them a different way to see things. The Smyrnans see the crowds of people standing before the statue of Caesar in the temple and saying Caesar is Lord and they feel overmatched. But then Jesus puts on their night vision goggles, and they see the risen Jesus with a face like the sun and a voice like many waters. They see him on the throne surrounded by a multitude that no one can count, all of them shouting ‘Jesus is Lord!’ All of a sudden Caesar’s team looks weak and small. The Smyrnans see the malice of their enemies in the community. They understand how that could lead to suffering and death and it seems terrifying. But Jesus puts on their night vision goggles and they see that death isn’t an end, it’s a door and on the other side of that door is a crown of life.

We are not living in Smyrna. We are not poor like them. And, unlike Smyrna, we aren’t worried that we will be killed because of our commitment to Jesus. But that doesn’t mean we don’t face death. Death menaces us too. Everyday.

I have done many, many graveside services over my years as a pastor. And when I do them, I often acknowledge how strong death seems at a graveside. A funeral is hard but walking away from the body of our loved one, knowing that the body of our loved one is in that box, and the box is going down into that hole – that’s even harder. When we see that hole and when we see that closed coffin, death growls in our ear, and he says, “It’s over. That’s it. There’s nothing else. You go into the hole and you enter into the eternal dark of non-existence.”

Death doesn’t just menace us at gravesides; death is always growling at us and trying to intimidate us. We reach our mid-40’s and suddenly our eyes lose focus. Why can’t I read these words, what’s going on? It’s middle age announcing itself and telling you to go buy some reading glasses. It’s also death whispering: I’m here and I’m getting closer. You lose someone in your life who was crucial to your happiness and you are so sad, and a voice in our head says, “You will never be happy again. It’s finished.” That’s death trying to drag you down. When you live with chronic pain, death will get in your ear and tell you the fun’s over, pain is your

master now. When you fail at something, when you have a professional failure and especially when you have a moral failure, death will get in your ear and say, "You're hopeless. You're no good so why even bother trying."

In all these places, when death whispers in your ear he's trying to get you to see life as small and limited and bounded. Death wants you living in a world where everything is scarce and limited, where there's not enough to go around. He wants you in that place because once you are in that place, he will get you to live for yourself. 'Life is short and life is dangerous, so watch your back, eat drink and be merry while you can, and if you have to push a few people out of the way to get your happiness, oh well.' That's the ethic of death and there's a lot of it today. Wherever we see people are dominated by fear and scarcity and a desire to protect their stuff, you can be sure that death has been at work.

When death tries to intimidate us like this do you know what we need? We need our night vision goggles. So, at the graveside when death seems so strong, I read 1 Corinthians 15. "Behold I tell you a mystery! We shall not sleep but we shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet. The trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised! Death where is your victory? Death where is your sting?!" And with our night vision goggles on things at the graveside look different: the lid of the coffin is not a prison; it is a door. It is not a box it is a passageway. In Christ it is a passageway into eternal life in the presence of God. Just like the people of Smyrna, for all the places where death tries to intimidate us, we need those night vision goggles.

I want to finish with a person from Smyrna who used his night vision goggles. His name is Polycarp and he was probably in the congregation the first time Revelation was read in the church of Smyrna. A reasonable date for the writing of Revelation is about 80 AD. Scholars debate and some say earlier and some say later, but this is a good guess. And if that's right, Polycarp would have been about 12 years old when John's vision was shared with his congregation. He would have heard Jesus tell his church, "Be faithful even to the point of death and I will give you the crown of life." He would have received those Easter night vision goggles.

Much later when he was 86 years old he would need those goggles. When he got older Polycarp became the bishop of Smyrna, and later still he would face death for Jesus. That story is told in one of the earliest Christian writings, the Martyrdom of Polycarp.

Here's the story. It's a time of persecution. Men and women are being killed for their faith. Polycarp is 86 years old and during a persecution he is arrested by the Roman rulers and brought back to the city. He is first met by a couple of rulers who address him privately and say, "Look man, how hard is it to offer a little incense and to say Caesar is Lord. Just do it and we can put all this behind us." Polycarp refuses.

So, they take him to the local forum and have him stand up before the mob of people and where the governor presided. In front of the mob, the governor said, take an oath to Caesar and the goddess of fortune and we'll let you go. Polycarp again refused. The governor says, I have wild beasts here. If you don't change your mind, I'll have no choice but to give you over to those beasts. Polycarp says, 'Bring them on.' The governor says, if you don't change your mind I will burn you at the stake. Polycarp says, 'I'm ready to meet my Lord.'

The crowd becomes enraged and gathers a huge pile of sticks together. Polycarp is placed on the pyre. The flame is lit and as they place him on the fire, Polycarp stays prayerful and hopeful and confident. The fire rises and the flames start to envelop him but then according to the onlookers, the most amazing thing happened. "The fire took on the shape of a hollow chamber, like a ship's sail when wind fills it, and it formed a wall around the martyr's figure. And there he was in the center of it, not like a human being in flames, but like a gold or silver ingot being refined in a furnace." The soldiers responsible for the execution became distressed by the fact that fire wouldn't consume him and so one of them went up and stabbed him with his spear. When he did Polycarp died, but not before a dove seemed to fly out of the flames towards heaven. And so, the 12-year-old boy who heard Jesus' Easter sermon never forgot his master's words and at 86, he lived them.

Now I know what some of you are wondering. Did that really happen? I mean, the whole fire like a hollow chamber thing? The dove? Well…who knows. I believe in miracles, do you? But for you sceptics, maybe this: Maybe if you were in the forum that day watching with your regular eyes, you would have seen a brave

and faithful man burning at the stake and dying in the fire. But I promise you that if you were there at the forum wearing your night vision goggles you would have seen something different, something deeper and more true. You would have seen the flames forming a wall around this man. You would have seen a man whose soul was being refined like a gold ingot in a furnace. You would have seen the Holy Spirit rise like a dove. You would have seen Jesus, his face shining like the sun, his voice sounding like the rush of many waters, welcoming his child home and giving him the crown of life.

You will not face the flames this week, but you will face death. Death will whisper in your ear a hundred times this week. So put on your night vision goggles. Go out there and meet death's cynicism with faith, hope and love, and don't be afraid, because Christ is risen. ©Rev. Peter Jonker