

Good morning, everyone, and Happy Easter! I have a feeling this is an Easter none of us will ever forget! We're living in a time when world events can overwhelm us. It's not just what we're going through right now, but in recent years there've been so many other things as well.

We've had the Me-Too movement, revealing the horrific abuse of women.

We've had devastating fires right here in California.

We've had the looming threat of climate change.

We've had an impeachment of our President for just the third time in our nation's history.

Decades after the Civil Rights movement, racism still makes our cities places of fear and anger.

Now, on top of it all, were confronted with COVID-19 as well as the fall-out in our economy. Many have said this is our nation's greatest test since WWII. I know in my own lifetime there's been nothing quite like it.

So we're living in an age when crisis after crisis descends on us with no let-up. Life seems to be growing more complicated and frightening. No wonder many people are asking, "What's going on? Is there any power beyond our own feeble efforts that can manage all this?" It's like, "Who's minding the store? Is anyone in charge?"

It may comfort you to know we're not the first ones to ask this question. The Apostle John himself must have asked it towards the end of the 1st century. John was the last of the apostles. By the time he was eighty, all the other apostles had been martyred for their faith. But then things got even worse.

An Emperor named Domitian came to the throne of Rome, and the persecution of Christians was amped up even more. John was exiled to Patmos, a barren little island in the middle of the Aegean Sea. It seemed he was doomed to live out his days there, without ever again being allowed to preach or lead the churches he loved and served. Christians were being thrown to the lions, bound up in animal skins and thrown into the sea; ground up in millstones; even used as torches to light public celebrations. There must have been times when John and his fellow believers wondered, "Who's minding the store? Who's in charge?"

John's Response to Jesus

In Revelations 1, while John was all by himself, "sheltering in place" on this little island, he suddenly saw a vision of Jesus.

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. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades. Revelations 1:17-18

Although it had been sixty years since he'd seen Jesus in the flesh, John knew who this was. Yet Jesus was strangely different. John says he was dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet with a golden sash around his chest. The hair on his head was as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand, he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. John says his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

It's no wonder; then, John responds the way he does. He says, "*When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.*" John isn't just respectful; he's literally floored by what he sees. He's "done in." He's wrecked. Throughout the Bible, this is how people react when confronted with the glory and majesty of God. Joshua, Daniel, and Isaiah all reacted the same way. In fact, years earlier, John, along with Peter and James, had seen Jesus transfigured on a mountain; they had a preview of his glory. When they saw him, it says, "*they fell facedown to the ground, terrified*" (Matt 17:4).

In July 2010, Paul Crowther, a professor of astrophysics, announced he and his team discovered a star that was the brightest star ever found in the universe. The mass of the star is 265 times bigger than our sun. But that's nothing — the brightness of this star is 10 million times greater than the light from our sun! Think about that: not 100 times brighter, or 1,000 times brighter, or even a million times brighter. It's ten million times brighter than our sun! How can anything be that bright?

Thinking about that star gives us a sense of what the glorious presence of God is like. Scripture says God is a being who "lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see." And what we see here is what's true of God is true of God's Son, Jesus. It's like his glory is ten million times greater than anything we've ever seen.

Jesus' response to John

But look at what Jesus does. John says, "Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid."

Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus often used physical touch to bring comfort and reassurance. On one occasion, a disfigured leper approached Jesus and cried out, "*If you are willing, you can make me clean.*" Scripture says Jesus had compassion on him and reached out his hand and touched the man and said, "*I am willing. Be clean.*" He didn't have to touch him to heal him. That's like me entering a hospital ward filled with patients suffering from COVID-19 and going from bed to bed, shaking their hands.

In this Pandemic, we all miss touch, don't we? We miss handshakes, hugs, and even high fives. In a TED talk, John Sutherland, an officer in London's police department, explains a principle in forensic science called Locard's Exchange Principle. Developed by Edmond Locard, known as the Sherlock Holmes of France, this principle has a simple premise: every contact leaves a trace. In other words, every criminal leaves a trace behind. He explains how this applies not just to forensic science but to all human relationships. He says,

Every time two people come into contact with one another, an exchange takes place. Whether between lifelong friends or passing strangers, we encourage, we ignore, we hold out a hand, or we withdraw it. We walk towards, or we walk away. We bless, or we curse... And every single contact leaves a trace. The way that we treat and regard one another matters. It really matters.

Not only does it matter, but it's also life-giving. Jesus understood this. That's why he places his right hand on John. This is the same hand that John said earlier holds the seven stars, which represented the seven churches under John's care. The hand that holds the churches also comforts and reassures this singular man.

But Jesus also spoke to John. He says, "Do not be afraid." Literally, "Stop being afraid." Certainly, part of what Jesus was saying is, "John, you needn't be afraid of me." But Jesus was always saying this to his frightened disciples, regardless of what they were afraid of. Every time they were afraid or anxious, like when they were in the boat, and the storm threatened to kill all of them, he'd say, "Fear not! Don't be afraid."

Today, our entire planet is dealing at some level with fear. Right now, the world is full of real danger. For many of us, our fears are experienced in something we call anxiety or worry. One psychologist has called anxiety the "official emotion of our age." It's been defined as "a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained." Whether it's fear or anxiety or both, it threatens to rob us of peace and joy. It consumes us. Yet, the risen Jesus comes to us in the midst of this very real danger and says, "Fear not. Stop being afraid."

How do we do that? We can start by simply bringing our fears and anxieties to him. Instead of allowing our heart and mind to fruitlessly churn with worries about school closings, travel plans, economic downturns, or the potentially infected surfaces you've touched, cast your cares on him because he cares for you. Try this: turn your 20 seconds of hand-washing into a moment when you consciously entrust yourself and your loved ones into his hands. And then every time you squirt some sanitizer on your hands, remind yourself of his promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Use those rituals to remind yourself where your true safety lies.

I heard a podcast last week in which several pastors were discussing how to lead our churches through this time of crisis. They all said the number one thing people need right now from their leaders is a "non-anxious presence." Think about that in relation to Jesus. Look at him, standing before John. Look at him, holding the seven churches in his right hand while they're being thrown to the lions. Does Jesus look anxious to you? The risen Christ epitomizes a leader with a non-anxious presence! So turn to him. Lean into him.

We might ask, "How can Jesus be so confident? How can he expect us to live without fear and anxiety in such troubled times?" The answer comes in what Jesus says next about himself.

He's the Sovereign Lord of History

First, he says he's the sovereign Lord of history. Jesus says, "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One." This is a clear statement of his absolute divinity. In the Old Testament, it was God who said, "*I am the first, and I am the last; apart from me, there is no God*" (Isaiah 44:6). Earlier in Revelation 1, God the Father says, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega...who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.*"

Now, Jesus says essentially the same thing about himself. In fact, later in Revelation, he says the exact same thing, "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End*" (21:6). Make no mistake, Jesus IS the Alpha. He is, before all things. He's the Lord of all creation. Through him, all things were made. And through him, all things will be brought to their proper fulfillment. He's also the Omega. He's the goal of all history. He's the starting point, and he's the endpoint. He had the first word in creation, and he'll have the last word in the new creation.

And here's what I want you to see: if he's the First and the Last, if he's the beginning and the end, then he's Lord of everything in-between, including the Coronavirus! That's why he adds, "I am the Living One." There's nothing that catches him off guard. He's the sovereign Lord of history, and throughout history, he's used events like this to get people's attention. God is not beyond allowing affliction into our lives to get our attention and remind us where our true source of security lies.

He's got our attention, doesn't he? Everyone on the planet is on high alert. It's like when you're at a gathering of family and friends, and everyone is sitting around the table talking and laughing, and all of a sudden, the host clinks his glass. What happens? There's a hush. Everyone quiets down, turns towards him, and listens. Well, what if the Lord of history is clinking his glass right now? Are you turning towards him? Are you listening? Is he your Alpha and Omega? If he's your Omega if he's the endpoint and the goal of everything, that means everything he brings your way is just meant to bring you to him. He's not a means to an end; he's the end. We get that confused, and God becomes for us a means to an end instead of the end. If he's the end if he's the Omega and all things reach their final conclusion in him, what do I have to fear?

He's Holds the Keys of Death and Hades

But there's still another reason Jesus says not to be afraid. He says, *"I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."* Jesus says you don't have to be afraid. I've defeated death. I hold the keys of death and Hades. Folks, this is the message of Easter. He was dead, but on the third day, he came to life. Jesus walked right into the gaping jaws of the greatest enemy there is. On the cross, he let all the powers that threaten to destroy us have their way with him. He let death take him captive. But three days later, he busted out of that prison and brought the keys with him! What do keys do? They symbolize authority, and they get you in and out of a building. Jesus has the keys that set us free from the prison of death and the grave!

You see, his resurrection accomplished something for us. Jesus once said, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). He's saying, "Oh, you may die just like I did. You may die by the hand of an evil ruler named Domitian. You may die of cancer or heart disease. You may die because of a deadly virus. But don't be afraid! I hold the keys of death and Hades! I have authority to free you from death's grip."

If that's true, what's left to fear? All fear is rooted in the fear of death. Do you know that? The New Testament book of Hebrews says Jesus shared in our humanity *"so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death"* (Heb. 2:14-15). You see, the fear of rejection, the fear of financial loss, the fear of pain and suffering, they're all, in the end, the fear of death. But Jesus holds the keys to set us free from that fear.

Rodin was a French impressionist sculptor. If you were to tour his museum in France, you'd find his most famous work of art, called "The Thinker." What you may not realize is "The Thinker" was really a study he'd done to sit on the top of these massive gates he also sculpted, called The Gates of Hell. The Gates of Hell

depicts innumerable beings writhing in agony on their way to an eternity separated from God. For years people wondered what "The Thinker" is thinking about. Well, now we know. He's not thinking about where he left his clothes the night before. He's thinking about death and the possibility of an eternity separated from God. Perhaps he's even wondering how to overcome that.

And that's something humankind, with all our acquired knowledge through the centuries, hasn't been able to overcome. But there is One who's overcome it for us. His name is Jesus. He has the keys! He has authority to set you free from both death and hell. So let the power and the reality of his words free you: "I was dead, and now, look, I'm alive forever and ever. I hold the keys of death and Hades." That's why the Apostle Paul could say, *"Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"* (1 Corinthians 15:54b-55). You see, on the cross, Jesus took the sting of death upon himself, so we don't have to.

So, once again, I say to you, what's there to fear? Jesus Christ, the risen one, is the sovereign Lord of history. He's the First and the Last, the Living One. He's defeated death and holds the keys of death and Hades. He's the ultimate non-anxious presence, and he says to us in this text, "There's nothing left to fear."

The God of the universe is clinking his glass. He wants to get your attention. Will you turn to him and listen? If you're a follower of Jesus, if you know him and love him, will you turn to him and listen? Maybe your fears and anxieties are getting the best of you. Maybe you need to turn again and look at him. Maybe you need a fresh vision of who he is. Maybe you've forgotten that not only does he hold the seven stars in his right hand, but he's the Alpha and Omega and holds the keys to death and Hades. Maybe like so many of the churches Jesus addressed in the next two chapters, you've been putting your trust in the wrong things. Maybe like the church at Ephesus, you've "forsaken the love you had at first." Or maybe like the church at Pergamum, you've compromised what the Bible says is right and wrong and replaced it with your own opinions. I don't know why you've turned away, but if you have, this is the time to turn back and listen to him.

Or maybe you're not yet a follower of Jesus. Maybe you're reading this message as a one who's honestly seeking. Maybe this Coronavirus has shaken you, causing you to question some of your assumptions about life. You thought if you just did all the right things, then everything would turn out okay. But this thing has shaken you. Would you consider that perhaps there's a God who cares enough about you that he'd use extreme measures to get your attention? He wants to be your Alpha and Omega. He wants you to know that you don't have to live in fear. You don't have to be hopeless. You can know there's something bigger than all of this. Something that transcends all the pain and all

the suffering. Only the One who says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," can be that and wants to be that for you.

If that's you, I want to invite you to place your trust in a new leader, Jesus Christ. He came to earth as the long-awaited Messiah. He went around doing good and teaching about the kingdom of God. And then at the cross, he took upon himself your sin and mine. He paid the price for your freedom and forgiveness. But death would not have the last word. On the third day, he rose again. He now holds the keys of death and Hades. All you have to do is say to him, "I want you to set me free. I want you to get me out of this prison of fear I've been living in. I believe you're the only one who can do it."

I want to invite you to say a simple prayer in your heart right now: "Dear God, I know I'm a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe that He died for my sin and that you raised Him to life. I believe he holds the keys to set me free from the fear of death. I want to trust Him as my Savior and follow Him as Lord, from this day forward. Guide my life and help me to do your will. I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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