

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“FIRSTBORN FROM THE DEAD”
Revelation 1:4-8

Christ’s resurrection is the pivotal moment in history.
The empty tomb changes everything.

But it does not always *seem* that way, does it?

What does Easter mean for the man who is
convinced no one can break his bondage to secret sin?

What does Easter mean for the woman who stands
at death’s door and fears that God will reject her?

What does Easter mean for the young person who
wants to follow Jesus but questions if it is worth the cost of
taking up the cross and losing one’s life?

☐ Please turn with me to Revelation 1.

■ We will start with verse 4 ~ **“John, To the seven
churches in the province of Asia”**.

Taken together, the diverse settings, challenges,
strengths, and failures of these churches represent those
of Christ’s Body in every time and place – including our
own. It goes to show that even *now* {Heb 4:12} **“the word of
God is alive and active,”** {2 Tim 3:16} **“useful for
teaching, rebuking, correcting and training”** *us* **“in
righteousness, so that”** we, with **“all God’s people, may
be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

■ Continuing in verse 4: **“Grace and peace to you...”**

📖 **“Grace”** is undeserved mercy and kindness.

📖 **“Peace”** is not merely the absence of conflict; it is
the state of spiritual, mental, emotional, and social well-
being that depends on God’s saving action and presence.

○ These churches are in desperate need of both:
five are being undermined from within by sin and
frailty; 3 are under attack from the outside; and all 7
will soon undergo intense persecution as Rome begins
to compel emperor worship.

■ Back to verse 4 and then on to verse 5: **“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.”**

① As for **“him who is, and who was, and who is
to come”**: the pagans sing **“Zeus who was, Zeus
who is, and Zeus who will be”**; likewise, a shrine to
the goddess Minerva features the inscription, **“I am all
that hath been and is and shall be.”** Not so! These
idols have not been, are not now, and never will be.

☼ God the Father is the one **“who is, and who
was, and who is to come.”** So when it seems that the
empty tomb doesn’t change anything, remember: He
who raised Jesus from the dead is worthy of our
worship, our obedience, and our loyalty.

② **“...and from the seven spirits”** (that is, the
“sevenfold Spirit”) **“before his throne.”**

→ Centuries earlier the Almighty foretold that **“The
Spirit of the LORD will rest on”** Messiah (there’s 1),
“the Spirit of wisdom” (2) **“and of understanding”**
(3), **“of counsel”** (4) **“and of might”** (5), **“of the
knowledge”** (6) **“and fear of the LORD”** (that’s 7) (Is
11:2). These are not separate spirits; they are

qualities of the one **Holy Spirit**, who is “**the sevenfold Spirit before [the] throne.**”

☼ When it seems that the empty tomb doesn’t change anything, remember: The Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends to dwell in his followers is well able to enlighten, equip and empower you to honor God.

③ “**...and from Jesus Christ.**”

☆ John identifies him, 1st, as “**The faithful witness.**”

→ The Greek for “**witness**” is μαρτυρῶ, which is the root of our word “martyr.” Jesus said, {Jn 18:37} “**The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify**” (that is the verb form of μαρτυρῶ) “**to the truth**”.

❖ During his incarnation Jesus stood firm and constant in his witness, even to the point of execution. He is our model when we are tempted to protect ourselves by denying the truth.

☆☆ 2nd, He is “**the firstborn from the dead.**”

• He is the “**firstborn**” in sequence: 1 Corinthians 15:22-23: “**All who are related to Christ will be given new life. But in this order: Christ, the first-fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.**”

• And He is the “**firstborn**” in importance. Colossians 1:18: “**he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.**”

❖ He is the “**firstborn**” and He reigns supreme over all powers that demand first place. He is our true hope in the face of death and idolatry.

☆☆☆ 3rd, He is “**the ruler of the kings.**”

→ When Jesus ascended his Father “**exalted him to the highest place**” (Philippians 2:9).

Many do not yet recognize Christ’s lordship – in part, because most kings do not hobnob with the lowly, wash dirty feet, and turn the other cheek.

→ Jesus had every opportunity to exercise power in the conventional ways. The devil offered him {Lk 4:5-7} “**all the kingdoms of the world**” saying, “**I will give you all their authority and splendor...If you worship me.**” Jesus declined because Satan worship is abhorrent, and equally because God’s kingdom {Jn 18:37} “**is not of this world.**” Its principles and methods radically contradict those of every human empire.

→ The kingdom of God could never be established, grown, and defended through money, the political process, manipulation, or coercion. Instead, Jesus achieved it by humbling himself and “**becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!**” (Philippians 2:8)

→ Psalm 89:27 prophesies that God will “**appoint [Messiah] to be [the] firstborn, the most exalted of the kings.**” This is already reality, and someday, “**every knee**” “**in heaven and on earth and under the earth**” [shall] **bow**” “**at the name of Jesus,**” and “**every tongue will confess that [He] is Lord**” (Philippians 2:10-11).

❖ Jesus reigns. Though “**the kings of the earth**” rebel against him, {Job 42:2} “**no purpose of [his] can be thwarted.**” He is our security when discipleship requires us to resist the world.

✧ So when it seems that the empty tomb doesn't change anything, remember: God the Son is alive, He is trustworthy, and He is sovereign.

All of this can *feel* distant and unreal, especially when we are entangled in sin or confronting death or staring persecution in the face. But the empty tomb makes an enormous practical difference in the day-to-day lives of those who follow Jesus.

■ Back to verse 5: **“To him who loves us...”**

→ He loves us, not because we are so great but because He is. {Rom 5:8} **“God demonstrates his... love for us in this: While we were still sinners,”** (while we were his enemies, hostile to him, unable and unwilling to obey) **“Christ died for us.”**

This is an ongoing reality. Five of the seven churches in the province of Asia are seriously compromised by sin. The Lord continues to love them anyway, just as He continues to love us.

What is more concrete than *αγαπε* love?

■ Verse 5: **“and has freed us from our sins by his blood.”**

By his death and resurrection Jesus erased the guilt of our sin and destroyed its power to control us.

What is more concrete than victory over sin?

■ On to verse 6: **“and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father.”**

God has given his people a critical role in expanding his reign in the world.

What is more concrete than purpose for living?

As for the future, the reign of God will be fully realized when Jesus returns in glory. It will be a great day! But not everyone will rejoice.

■ Verse 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.”**

There are two kinds of grief in view here.

☺ One is the momentary and redemptive mourning of repentance.

→ In Zechariah 12:10 God vows, **“I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child....”**

This grief is redemptive. It is a good gift from God, it involves **“grace”** and **“supplication,”** and it is short-lived.

Who will mourn this way? Those whose hearts have been hard, yet who soften when they see Jesus is Messiah. They will turn him, and He will have mercy.

→ Their tears will last only for a moment, for **“they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”** (Revelation 21:3-4).

☹ The other grief is the eternal, fatal mourning of unwavering rebellion.

→ Revelation 16 speaks of the non-redemptive sorrow of the wicked who “[curse] **the name of God,**” refusing “**to repent and glorify him**” even as they suffer the consequences of their sin.

→ Revelation 18 reports the non-redemptive weeping of many when the world economy collapses. This is the bereavement of those who are invested in a system of greed, excess, and exploitation.

→ And Revelation 19 describes how “**the kings of the earth and their armies**” will defy God to the end. They will cry non-redemptive tears of angry rebellion when Christ the LORD defeats them.

The passing of the old order will not dry the tears of those who have given their hearts to it. It will cause them endless weeping.

Jesus’ resurrection is the pivotal moment in history. The empty tomb changes everything.

The question is: are we participating fully in the resurrection life? And are we helping others to experience it?