

The First to Emerge from Isolation  
John 20:1-18; Revelation 1:4b-5a

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*Grace to you and peace from . . . Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.* Rev. 1:4b-5a

The New Testament twice calls Jesus the firstborn of the dead. The term obviously refers to his resurrection. Jesus was the first to break free from the grave and, when he did so, he carried with him the promise that we shall be able to follow him from death into life.

I mark it significant that the Book of Revelation is one of the New Testament places Jesus is called the firstborn of the dead. (Col. 1:18 is the other.) Revelation comes from a time in which it was terribly difficult for the church. Christians were persecuted, chiefly because the emperor of the time wanted people to worship him. Some were dying. Some were threatened economically with the loss of their job. All were suffering in some way. It was an open question if they and their church would survive. It was in the midst of that context that the author of Revelation pointed to Jesus and called him “the firstborn of the dead.”

We are at liberty today to draw upon that first century image and modify it for the situation we are in now. COVID-19 has us under threat. We are isolated. We are alone. We are shut in. It is as if some heavy stone has been rolled across life and we cannot get around it. In this context of ours, we can look to Jesus and see him as the first to emerge from isolation. We are not there yet. But he is free. He is going before us. And the Jesus who is free comes to us with a message we need to here in our time of confinement.

*Christ emerges from isolation to tell us of the defeat of death.*

Easter marks our Lord’s victory over death. His defeat of death does not mean the end of death. How could it? We are painfully aware that death happens. We see the growing tally of deaths from COVID-19 on our television screens. As of the time of this recording, the death toll just in the U.S. is over 14,000 persons. We see refrigerated semi trailers parked outside New York City hospitals where they serve as temporary morgues. So many people are dying, hospitals and funeral homes are running out of places to store the corpses until they can be dealt with. Death is not ended. How can we say death is ended?

What Jesus’ victory over death means is not that death is ended. It means that Jesus has defeated the lastingness of death. Those whom we have loved and lost to death are not kept in death. Jesus, the firstborn of creation, opened the way for them and they have been born into life. If you press me for proof of this, I have to say I have no syllogism or formula or equation. All I have is scripture and experience. But I stand on the experience and say that death, though real, does not last. I say that because while I do not remember my father – he died when I was so little – I know him as well as I know anyone. I do not recall ever feeling his embrace; but I know his

constant love. And none of that is merely imagined; it comes from outside of me. I conclude that somewhere he has life.

So we are living confined in a day of death and we cannot seem to stop it. The Easter message is that though death is with us forever, there is nothing lasting about it. Jesus, the first to emerge from isolation, has defeated the lastingness of death.

*Christ emerges from isolation to tell of the undefeated values.*

We know the values Jesus stood for and taught. He stood for and taught the intricate worth of each and every person right down to the last and the least. Someone may not have pennies to count, but God knows the number of hairs on their head. Someone's mind may be so far gone that they cannot form a coherent thought, but God reads their heart. Jesus stood for and taught the sacred blessedness of children and the importance of their welfare. Should anyone harm them intentionally, Jesus said they would have a God to answer. Jesus taught that the way of greed is the path of destruction, that if a person were to gain the world but lose their soul, they would have nothing. And he taught that the way of violence was not the answer to the deep-seated problems of the world. He said to turn the other cheek, to pray for your enemies, to bless them and not curse them. We know the values Jesus stood for and taught.

We know, too, the judgment passed on those values at Calvary. Those who whipped Jesus, beat him, spat upon him, taunted him, and crucified him made mockery of everything he taught. Gentleness and nonviolence? The armed mob and the powerful soldiers were the ones who won. Humility? The arrogant scribes and Pharisees were the ones who won. Love? It was the cold and brutal law of Rome that won. Truth? Lies filled the air and went unchallenged.

But that was Friday! This is Sunday! And the resurrection of Jesus has ratified the message of Christ. Truth defeated the lie. Weakness bested power. Humility broke selfish pride. And love defeated violence.

We can live in the light of that victory now, knowing that the values of the Lord will prevail and are the only ones worth having. The shabbiness lesser values will be revealed in time to show just how tawdry they are. Christ emerges from isolation to tell of the values that cannot be defeated.

*Christ emerges from isolation to tell of God's abiding presence.*

Mary stood alone weeping outside the tomb. She stood alone with her grief. There was none to hear her sobs, none to dry her tears. But Christ was beside her! Christ was befriending her.

The disciples were social distancing in their own way, at least trying to keep clear of the religious and governmental authorities. They were afraid to be in the streets. But Jesus stood with them in their aloneness, and brought them the Easter gifts of peace, joy, strength, and courage.

Still later, the Apostle Paul was alone in a prison cell and alone on trial. All his friends had left him. He was alone but he wasn't alone. "The Lord stood by me," he cried, "and gave me strength."

Many of you will remember that bit of graffiti on the wall of a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Someone had scrawled on the wall, "Where is God?" Someone else wrote beneath it, "God is here."

So God is with you wherever you may be. The first to emerge from isolation proclaims the abiding presence of God.

We are not yet led out of the Coronavirus scare. The pandemic has us in isolation. But we are not alone. The firstborn of the dead is the first to emerge from isolation. As he comes to you, he brings a message of hope:

- Death shall not win even though it comes
- The lesser values of small-minded people are doomed to defeat and the shabbiness of their puny ideas will be revealed
- The living God is with you – in your homes, your fears, your isolation.

So in the midst of our pandemic we say with the writer of Revelation, "Grace and peace" this Easter "from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth."