

Easter 2 4/3/16
Revelation 1:4-18 C

“FEAR NOT, I AM THE FIRST AND THE LAST, AND THE LIVING ONE, I DIED, AND BEHOLD I AM ALIVE FOREVERMORE, AND I HAVE THE KEYS OF DEATH AND [THE GRAVE]”.

Keys symbolize authority and power. If you have the car keys, you can drive the car. And vice versa, if you don't have the keys, you can't drive the car. Same thing with house keys, the key to a post office box, or the keys to a safe deposit box. If you have the key, you have the authority to unlock the lock. And, if you don't have the key, you do not have the power to unlock the lock.

In our Epistle for today, Jesus says, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and [the grave]”. This means that Jesus has the authority, the power, to unlock death and the grave, so that they can hold us no more. Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. “What comfort this sweet sentence gives,” we sing in that most wondrous of Easter hymns.

But, before we actually get to the verses of our text for this Sunday, allow me to make a few comments of the book of Revelation.

Once every three years, our epistle lessons for the Easter season are taken from Revelation. Revelation is probably one of the most intriguing, yet most misunderstood books in the Bible. And as we are finding out in Sunday morning Bible class, it's really not that hard to understand.

The key to understanding this book is found right in the first words of this book, “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” A "revelation" is a revealing of something that would otherwise remain hidden. The Greek word here is

"Apocalypse," which literally means a "pulling back of the veil." Perhaps the best way for us to understand this is to remember the end of the Wizard of Oz. The little dog Toto runs to where the wizard is and tears open the curtain so that everyone can see who the wizard is, what he looks like, and what he is doing. In that same way, in this book, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ," the Holy Spirit opens for the curtain for us so that we may see who Jesus is, what He has done for us, what He is doing for us now, so that we may be encouraged and comforted.

And yet, how often are we not comforted! In the Church Year, this Sunday has a most interesting name. This Sunday after Easter is called Low Sunday. It doesn't refer to "low" attendance, but how "low" the disciples felt after Easter. They were walking by fear, instead of faith. That's the way we often walk, isn't it?

Let me ask you a question: who wants you to be afraid? God or Satan? The father of all lies wants you to be afraid, feeling alone, abandoned, like a lost little lamb shaking in your boots. The last thing Satan wants you to believe is that Easter is for you

The disciples had heard the reports of the women. Peter had run to the tomb and seen with his own eyes the place where Jesus' body once lay. Now, in fear, they locked themselves in, in fear that those who had killed Jesus would soon come for them. Last week, we saw with the eyes of faith and heard with our own ears, Christ is risen.

And yet, in your weakness, do you try to lock yourself in, to hide from your fears? The fear of failing health, that the day may well come that you can't take care of yourself and you will lose your independence? Financial fears, even employment? Fear that your children are abandoning the faith into which they were baptized and you taught them? Fear of

embarrassment before your neighbor, especially being rejected and ridiculed for your church membership? Fear of death and the grave? We try to lock ourselves in, to hide from our fears, but we can't. No matter how hard we try, those fears creep in on us and overwhelm us.

Jesus has risen to burst the bonds of death and the grave. He has ascended into heaven to prepare a place in heaven for you. But, today, does it seem that He isn't here, that His resurrection victory means nothing for you?

In our Epistle, Jesus comes to John and the first words He speaks are "Fear not!" Then, Jesus tells John why there is no need to fear: "I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and the grave".

"I died," Jesus says. Jesus died to defeat our greatest enemy, death itself. Because of our sin, we die. "The wages of sin is death," the Bible says. But, God did not want us to die. So, He sent His Son to take on our sin and die the death our sin deserved. "[He] has freed us from our sins by His blood," John writes in our lesson.

"And behold I am alive forevermore," Jesus says. The third day He rose in triumph from the grave. And, now, He lives forever. He has the keys, the authority, over death and the grave.

In their fears, the disciples needed to know Jesus was with them. Jesus came to them the evening of His resurrection and said to them, "*Peace be with you.*" This was not a greeting, a "Good evening. Hi, how ya doing?" These are words of absolution, forgiveness. Jesus knew that in the weakness of their mortal nature, the disciples were not fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things. So, He forgave them of their sin and breathed His eternal life into them.

The book of Revelation was written to seven congregations in seven cities of Asia Minor. These seven churches are to be about the work Her Lord has given her -- making disciples of all nations. Time for mission work is short. And, they were small, insignificant in the eyes of the world, and even worse, the devil raged against them to silence the preaching of the Gospel.

So, one last time, the Living Lord of the Church comes to John with a message for His Church -- as she carries out her mission, Christ is with her.

Our Lord Christ stands among 7 golden lampstands. The lampstands immediately remind us of the lampstands which adorned the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the place God dwelt among His people and the "light" of the lampstands reminded the people that God was ever among them. In our lesson, Christ in His glory standing among the lampstands, means that Christ, who is now at the right hand of God, is at the same time with us in His Church on earth today.

And that brings us to this matter of the number "seven" -- 7 spirits, 7 lampstands, 7 stars. Seven is three + four. "Three" represents God, the 3-in-1 of the Holy Trinity. "Four" represents the earth, the four corners of the earth, as we commonly say. So, seven is the three of God plus the four of earth. "Seven" means that God with us in Christ, who comes to us through the Word and Sacraments.

As Jesus was with the disciples on the evening of His resurrection, as He was with the Church of John's day, He is with us today, right now. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus gave them peace once more and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

In Lutheran theology, we call this the Office of the Keys. Jesus gives the Keys that are rightly His to His Church to open heaven's door by forgiving penitent sinners their sins and by closing heaven's door to impenitent sinners, as long as they do not repent.

That is the work of Christ's Church on earth. That is why we gather here Sunday after Sunday. God draws you to this house week after week so that He can say to you, "Peace be with you. I forgive you your sins."

These are words of great joy. With these words, Jesus comforts you, gives you hope, and drives out all fear.

My Dear Christian Friends, Christ is with us. We have no reason to fear. Because of His death and resurrection, Jesus now has the keys of death and the grave. As the Conqueror of death and the grave, Jesus is with us and comes to us through the hearing of the Word, in the new birth of our baptism, and in Holy Communion to give us His eternal life so that it may be our very own.

Jesus comes to you and me today, wraps His arms of love around us, and says, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and [the grave]". I have won the victory for you!