

**“Easter People in a Cruel World”**  
**April 28, 2019**  
**Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church**  
**Dr. Dock Hollingsworth, Senior Pastor**

*John to the seven churches that are in Asia:*

*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*

*To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.*

*Look! He is coming with the clouds;  
every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.  
So it is to be. Amen.*

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

The Easter candy is gone. The baskets and bunnies are shoved back into the attic for another year. This Sunday, at church - there is no orchestra, no cross of flowers, no full crowd. The lilies have wilted, and we are back to things as normal – whatever normal is. Here’s the tension. We are Easter people. Last week we celebrated the empty tomb, and the tomb is still empty this Sunday. We are people of the resurrection, so every day is Easter. But when we get back to the ordinary it doesn’t feel like Easter. We are back to jobs we don’t like, cars that need repair, doctors’ appointments and radiation treatments – divorce papers and “*How am I going to pay what I owe this year in taxes?*” (The last one might have gotten a little too autobiographical.) We are back to a world where Easter worshippers in Sri Lanka are bombed and where almost 13% of Americans aren’t confident of where their next meal will come from.<sup>1</sup> How are we supposed to live as Easter people in a cruel world? “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done*” – but we are living in the gap between Easter Sunday and the coming Kingdom of God.

The original audience for today’s scripture was living in that same space. They were persecuted Christians, in Asia Minor, trying to make sense of the life of faith in trying times. It had been a generation or two since the Easter event and they are living a Monday through Saturday calendar of pain and disappointment, death and disease, and everyday oppression. They were feeling the great gulf between the victory of Easter and a world where it looks like evil chalking up most of the wins.

So, John, persecuted himself and banished to the Isle of Patmos writes an apocalyptic of hope to the persecuted Christians. It is an authoritative letter, it begins, “*The revelation of Jesus Christ...*”. This is what is revealed to John by Jesus himself... so listen up.

But before we go any further into this “*revelation of Jesus Christ*”, it might be worth saying a word about apocalyptic literature. The Book of Revelation is full of wild images and beasts and fanciful things which makes this a book that is hard to get close to. We do not communicate much in the apocalyptic genre so, since it is both uncommon and full of strange images, so it causes wild speculation. Apocalyptic writing does not respond well to our questions about “*what it really means*”. It doesn’t dissect or diagram well. When we bring logic and try to “*make sense of*” the apocalyptic poetry, we just miss the point completely. As Schussler Fiorenza says, it is a collection of images that persuades not by

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<sup>1</sup> Online article. Atlantastudies.org, *Mapping Food Insecurity in Metro Atlanta*, Jerry Shannon, UGA

appealing to “*our logical faculties but to our imagination and emotions.*”<sup>2</sup> Apocalyptic writing does not intend to explain, but to evoke.

I remember when I was in college, commuting back and forth from home in Atlanta to school in Macon, I was making that trip in a pollen green, 1972 Ford Pinto. In fact, the car looked its best during pollen season because the pollen filled in the rust spots and blended perfectly with the paint that was left. The car had white, “made to look like leather” bucket seats and an AM radio. In the mid-1980’s, AM radio between Atlanta and Macon was not much. Occasionally I might find a station playing Doc and Merle Watson banjo classics. But I could usually find a radio preacher out of somewhere like Barnesville or Flovilla on nearly every trip and they did like to preach on Revelation. As I said, apocalyptic literature is not easily understood, but you would never know it listening to them. They had all of the Book of Revelation figured out. They would say things like... “*the 6 headed beast, well, that’s obviously China...*” Huh? There is not much that is clear about Revelation on purpose. Revelation does not intend to be plain; it intends to be stirring.

Well, why not just be clear? I knew a guy in an earlier church whose job was to measure magazine advertising effectiveness. He would often say, “*It is impossible to be too clear.*” He loved clear speech. For him, clarity was everything. He would not like apocalyptic literature. Poetry evokes.

Consider this poetry from the play, Camelot, Robert Goulet sings these words:<sup>3</sup>

*If ever I would leave you  
It wouldn't be in summer.  
Seeing you in summer  
I never would go.  
Your hair streaked with sunlight,  
Your lips red as flame,  
Your face with a lustre  
That puts gold to shame!*

*But if I'd ever leave you,  
It couldn't be in autumn.  
How I'd leave in autumn  
I never will know.  
I've seen how you sparkle  
When fall nips the air.  
I know you in autumn  
And I must be there.*

*And could I leave you  
Running merrily through the snow?  
Or on a wintry evening  
When you catch the fire's glow?*

*If ever I would leave you,  
How could it be in springtime?  
Knowing how in spring I'm bewitched by you so?  
Oh, no! not in springtime!*

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<sup>2</sup> Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 25.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Loewe, *If Ever I Would Leave You*

*Summer, winter or fall!  
No, never could I leave you at all!<sup>4</sup>*

You see, there is a clearer way to say that. You could just say, “*Baby, I ain’t going anywhere.*” But poetry intends to arouse with images – not to engage our logic, but our imaginations and emotions – and John’s poetic apocalyptic is evoking God’s dominion. John does not intend to tell us in flat prose that God reigns. John is using language to soar – to evoke. God has defeated evil, once and for all, when the final tally is done, love wins! So, John paints it big...

*Look! He is coming with the clouds;  
every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.  
So it is to be. Amen.*

*“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*

To the defeated and oppressed church in Asia Minor, living sometime after Easter and before the coming Kingdom, John offers the poetry of God’s dominion. God wins! From beginning to end – Alpha and Omega, God was – God is – God is to come and on God’s reckoning, evil is done. All evil, all pain and suffering are playing a bit part inside a grand story. Evil may score two runs in the third, but we already know the final score – God wins! When all is tallied in the end, “*when all the saints shall gather over on the other shore*” ... love wins. All suffering is temporary. All pain is transitory. All evil actors play a losing hand – “*on his account, all the tribes of the earth will wail.*”

Compared to some of you, Melissa and I don’t exactly keep an aggressive calendar of evening engagements. Most nights, if I don’t have a nighttime meeting, we spend evenings at home, just the two of us. After a long day of meetings and calls and appointments and preparations and speech makings, I am usually just ready to crash. So, most nights we have dinner, sitting in front of the TV, binge watching Netflix and Amazon shows – something mindless and entertaining. Often these are old TV series that most of you saw two years ago but we are just getting around to. Recently, we watched the Jack Ryan series on Amazon. The series is based on a series of books written by Tom Clancy and Melissa and I had read several of the books, so we thought we’d enjoy the series.

We plop on the sofa – sweatpants and paper plates and leftovers and pillows, and we get ready for the next thriller episode. Jack Ryan is a former U.S. Marine and the series is action packed – edge of your seat stuff. He gets into nail-biting trouble himself, or the world hangs on the edge unless he can undetonate in time, that kind of stuff. One night, I caught myself. Melissa and I are watching – the scene is tense, the backbeat music is getting louder, Jack’s in trouble, he’s in big trouble – time is running out – I’m a nervous wreck and I’m not sure he’s going to make it – and then I caught myself and laughed. It occurs to me that we are watching Season 1 of Jack Ryan and Season 2 has already been announced. Jack is going to be fine. If they have already announced Season 2, you can relax when it looks like Jack’s in trouble, because you know how it is going to end.

That is exactly what John is trying to evoke in his poetry of the apocalypse. If you know how it ends, then you do not have to be afraid. If you know and trust that God’s grace is the final word, that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end – that the God who created you in goodness and delight, will see you safely home ... and that this messed up, broken and evil world will eventually be

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<sup>4</sup> This illustration used in a Fred Craddock sermon to make the same point, but I don’t remember which sermon.

claimed by God's unmeasurable love - then you are free to live and dance and love and laugh. The Book of Revelation tells us that the final episode has been written and... spoiler alert – God wins!

It does not completely diminish our suffering in the moment, but Revelation puts our pain in a broader context – the ultimate questions are answered, “*God is coming with the clouds. Every eye will see him*” ... “*I am the Alpha and the Omega,*” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. We can live free of fear if we know how it ends.

A friend of mine, Chuck Poole, used to pastor at First Baptist Macon, but for the last 15 years or so, Dr. Poole has been pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. Like most of us who are pastors, Dr. Poole attends lots of weddings. I love this observation from one of his wedding receptions a few years ago. Chuck said,

*As the evening wore on and the band played on, the dance floor became more and more crowded. At some point, I looked around at all those people, and it occurred to me that I knew almost every one of them. Because I knew most of them pretty well, I knew that none of them had waltzed their way through life. Most of them had been through some deep valley or were facing some dark shadow. They'd all known their share of loss or sorrow, disappointment or pain. But to see them dance, you'd think they hadn't a care in the world. None of them would have advanced to the finals on "Dancing With the Stars," but all of them were doing a magnificent job of dancing with the scars.<sup>5</sup>*

John's apocalyptic letter of hope tells us that if we know how it all ends, we are free to dance with the scars. Easter people can live lighter, freer, less anxiously if we trust that God's redemptive love has the last word. The words in our Monday through Saturday life that sound ultimate and defeating don't stand a chance against the victory of Easter. “*Unemployed, estranged, malignant, overdrawn, guilty, oppressed*” – during the week, those words sound final and hopeless. But, on Sunday, when we posit those against God's big love that bookends our lives and our history – Alpha and Omega – in the victorious Easter reality - we can just keep dancing with the scars because we know how the story ends and love wins.

Inside of belief and relationship with the risen Christ, it is possible to dance with the scars. If you have never trusted God's grace for your life, I would love the chance to talk with you about what the life of faith looks like. Would you like to join this church and link your broken life with ours? The faith is best lived in community and I would love to talk with you about locating your life with us so we can dance with the scars together. However you feel God nudging you toward next steps in the life of faith, I hope you will respond as we stand and sing.

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<sup>5</sup> Chuck Poole illustration sent to me by Greg Pope