

Easter Forever

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 1, 2018 – AM Sermon

Rev. Peter Jonker

Revelation 1:9-20

This year our Easter begins in a cave. Tradition tells us that's where John was when he saw his vision. He was a prisoner of Rome, a political prisoner, confined to the island of Patmos because instead of saying 'Caesar is Lord' like everyone else, he kept saying and he kept teaching that 'Jesus is Lord'. The empire didn't like that. So they exiled him to the Island of Patmos, a tiny island in the Aegean Sea. Tradition tells us that there on the island John was confined to a cave. If you go to the island of Patmos today you can actually visit the cave reputed to be the place where John was held. It's a dark gray place. It's about the size of one of our small classrooms upstairs only with rock walls and a rock ceiling that presses down on you. Today it's been turned into a kind of shrine. The walls are covered with tapestries and icons, lamps are burning, candles are lit; now it looks like a cozy little chapel. It looks like a pleasant nook where you wouldn't mind spending some time. But I promise you, when John was confined there it wouldn't have seemed like a cozy nook; it would have seemed like a tomb. The Romans intended the cave to be a dark hole where you felt like the walls were closing in and your hopes were vanishing. It was meant to break your spirit.

There is a certain symmetry between John's cave and the situation of the churches to whom he is writing. John writes this book to seven churches in Asia Minor, and these churches are all under considerable stress. They had always been frail. They were tiny little gatherings in a big pagan culture and that had always been hard. However, up till recently, the surrounding culture had tolerated their existence. Now things were changing. The Roman Emperor didn't like the competition from King Jesus and so people were getting thrown in jail and the churches were being squeezed. Christians were shut out of market deals, fired from jobs and generally harassed. The walls were closing in. It was all meant to break their Spirit. So this book was written by a man in a cave to people who felt like their walls were closing in. Which shows that you don't have to be physically enclosed by rock walls to understand what it might feel like to live in a cave. Cave walls can be made out of all sorts of material. And there are lots of people in this city and in this room who know what it feels like to have the walls closing in.

Cave walls can be made of years. I talked to a number of you after Howard Vanderwell's funeral and you lamented the loss of yet another friend. "*I'm always going to funerals, and so many of my friends are either gone, or they're a shell of their former selves. My world is shrinking.*" And it's not just your friends it's you. Your energy is going down. You can't drive at night anymore. So many of the things you used to love to do, you can't do them anymore. The walls are closing in.

Cave walls can be made of pain. Illness, and especially chronic illness, can feel this way. Talk to someone who lives with pain every day (and there are more of them than you think); It confines you. It takes the color out of everything; makes things gray. It drags you down body and soul.

Cave walls can be made of memories. You did something in the past, something terrible. You didn't just hurt another innocent person, you imprisoned yourself in this cave of shame. You function, but your guilt presses down on you like a stone ceiling. Or maybe someone did something to you. Someone you trusted. You opened yourself up to them, made yourself

vulnerable and they hurt you. And the hurt went all the way down to the core, and now you realize that so much of who you are has been shaped by that hurt. The daily choices you make, your emotional response in stressful situation, the way you love; they all bear the marks of this awful thing. It confines you. It hems you in.

But I suppose the thickest and darkest cave walls are made of death. There is no cave that feels darker and more confining; there is no cave that feels more final.

There is no cave that fills us with more fear, than that 6 foot deep rectangular cave into which we lower the people we love. I went to two funerals of people I loved this week. On Monday it was Howie's funeral. On Wednesday it was my mentor and former colleague John Timmer. And in between those funerals, on Facebook, I heard about a 2 year old child with connections to our community who was suddenly stricken with a brain tumor. A beautiful child suddenly cut down. They operated on the boy and he didn't make it. Death is such a dark, indiscriminate cave. It's also a cave for those left behind. Many of you have lost someone very dear to you, and you know that when you walk away from the cemetery, you don't leave your grief behind. You can't just take it off like a shirt. Your grief becomes a place; you live in its confines. It's a gray place with low ceilings and thick walls... Like a cave.

This passage is good news for all of us fearful cave dwellers. John has a vision and that vision is a message for those churches in Asia Minor confined by persecution, and to all of us who know what it's like to be trapped in the cave of our circumstances. It's a vision of someone who knows a little bit about what it's like to be confined in a cave. It's a vision of someone who did some hard time in a really scary cave. He spent three days in the cave of death and hell. The powers of Rome and the powers of hell seized him and they killed him and they wrapped him up. They put him in a cave and rolled a large stone in front of it. They put guards in front of the cave to make it as secure as possible. But all the powers of Rome and all the power of hell and all the weight of human sin and fear and shame could not hold our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus breaks the hold of sin and death. Jesus literally blows the doors off death. And now, clad in white and shining like the sun, he has a message for all us frightened cave dwellers. "*I am alive! Do not be afraid, I am the first and the last! I am the living one! I was dead but look! I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys to death and Hades!*" Whatever cave is confining you this morning, the resurrected Jesus says to you this morning: *I have the keys to all of the caves!*

I love this image of the resurrected Jesus in this passage. It is one of my favorites. It's a go to image when I feel anxious or confined. It lifts me up. There are a couple of things about this image that I find particularly encouraging. First, I love the power of the image. There is no stronger picture of Jesus anywhere in the Bible. The man who comes to John in this vision is definitely a man who can blow up caves and roll away stones. The eyes like fire, the voice like many waters, the seven stars in his right hand; it's an image of cosmic power. If you spend time studying you realize that every detail of Jesus' clothing and person has echoes in Old Testament passages like Daniel 10 and Isaiah 49 and Zechariah 4. John sees Jesus wearing the clothes of divinity. The crucified carpenter has become the Cosmic Christ and no power can stand before him. The man who was confused and god-forsaken in the garden is now shining like the sun. I need his power in my dark places.

But what I really love about this passage is the end of verse 17. John is terrified. He's fallen on his face like a dead man. But what happens next? The man with the shining face and the voice like many waters comes over and he lays a comforting hand on John's shoulder. It's a wonderful gesture of personal care. He may have eyes like blazing fire, but he's still the same man who took children on his knee and blessed them. Did you notice which hand he put on

John? It's his right hand. The same hand that holds the seven stars. The same hands that spins the planets, the same hand that births galaxies, the same hand that calls forth universes into existence, comes to us in our cave, comes into our little personal place of fear and holds us. *"My child. My beloved. Don't be afraid. I am here. I know your struggle. And I have the keys."* Of course, *this doesn't mean we will get out of our cave.* John didn't. He was still imprisoned when the vision ended. But even so, when I see Jesus take the hand that held the seven stars and lay it gently on the trembling shoulder of John, it gives me enormous hope. It's like the curtain is pulled back, and these cave walls that from a human perspective seem so terrible and so thick and so final suddenly become thin and temporary before the power and glory of this everlasting man.

Fred Craddock the great southern preacher tells this story of a sort of vision from his own childhood that reminds me of John's vision. Fred grew up in rural Tennessee, in an isolated place, miles away from the nearest church. Craddock grew up in the cave of poverty. Poor and without transportation, he never was able to get to a Sunday service. His mother did the best she could. On a Saturday night, she would get them in their good clothes and sit them in the living room. A few neighbors would come over and together they would sing a few of the old standbys: "Bringing in the Sheaves", "Standing on the Promises". Craddock asked his Mother, "Mom, why do we have to do this every Saturday!?" "Oh" said his Mother, "We're practicing. Someday you'll go to a real church and I want you to know what to do." One of the neighbors who came to these Saturday gatherings was Will Hunt, an 80 year old African American. One Saturday night Craddock was sitting beside Will and after the singing he said to him, *"Will, have you ever been in a real church?"* "Oh yeah!" said Will, *"hundreds of them."* "What's it like?" asked the young Craddock. *"Oh it's wonderful!"* said Will, *"It's the most stupendous amazing miraculous thing. You'll have to do it someday boy! But when you go, don't get fooled by the outside. It might not look like much. It might be old white siding and maybe the paint is peeling...but just you go inside. Inside the ceiling is blue, and the stars are shining like diamonds, and the angel choir joins with the church choir, and you are transported and everything is different!"* Well young Craddock was impressed...he remembered Will's words. Turns out one of the very first times he got to go to a church was for Will's funeral. Will died and Fred and his family went to the service for their neighbor. The church wasn't much. The outside was old white siding and peeling paint, just like Will had said. But when Craddock went inside he was disappointed. There was no blue-sky ceiling, no stars like diamonds, no angel choirs singing, only a lot of hot, sweaty people cooling themselves with hand fans. Craddock said to himself, *"Oh Will! You messed me up on this!"* So he sat down for the service... and the singers started singing and the mourners started crying and the preacher started preaching and the congregation began swaying and we all began singing, And all of a sudden when little Fred Craddock looked up *'the ceiling was blue, stars like diamonds shone, angel choirs soared above our heads as they sang William Hunt to his eternal rest.'* You see what happened there don't you? The resurrected one reached down and put his right hand on little Fred Craddock and the walls of Fred's cave became thin and frail and he could see the real truth of this world.

Now you may say, *"Well that's a nice story. But come on! That's a preacher exaggerating. That's a bunch of homiletical hyperbole!"* Really?! We're you here for Howard Vanderwell's funeral last Monday? At the end of the service we all stood up and sang *Love Divine, All Love's Excelling.* The organ started playing, and the singers started singing, we sang the words of the last stanza: *"Changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place. Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder love and praise."* And it was like the ceiling was

blue, and the stars were shining like diamonds, and the angel choirs were singing Howard Vanderwell to his eternal rest. And in that moment even that six foot rectangular cave of death didn't seem so strong before the resurrected power of the everlasting man.

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