

Get in the Zōn!
Revelation 1: 4-8, 17-18

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Easter Sunday, April 16, AD 2017
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You know how when you watch HGTV, your house always feels like a hovel? Or how when you go into a very nice clothing store, the clothes you are wearing suddenly feel so shabby? Or the way you feel when you meet a true expert in a field of study that is your hobby: you don't feel very smart. Multiply all that by a thousand. That approaches what the apostle John felt when he had a vision of Jesus. As a frail old man, John saw the King in his glory unveiled, and it wilted him. He just collapsed in fear.

Did you ever people speak like this, "Oh man, if my parents come home before we get this party cleaned up, I am *dead meat*." Or, "If I don't finish this project by noon, our funding is *dead and buried*." Or, "When the principal came around the corner, I thought I was going to *croak*!" You get the idea. Fear can make us feel that life is over. That's how John felt.

But this King had not come to slay John. He did not intend to incinerate him with his holy judgment. Rather, Jesus stretched out his right hand. The hand of power. The hand of authority. He laid that right hand upon John. And spoke to him with astounding words. "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 Hades."

John was flat on his face. But, in essence, Jesus told him, "No fearing now. Don't be afraid. Your fear has paralyzed you so you are *like* a dead man. But look, I *actually* became dead. Everything people fear happened to me. I entered death. It swallowed me. But look, I am alive. I am the Living One. Forever. Death no longer rules me. I own the keys to his house. I own death. Because I am life. Trust me."

In your Easter basket this morning, I want to place a treat. Better even than a chocolate egg. I want to teach you one of the words Jesus spoke in this passage. The word is Zōn. Zōn. It means *living*. When Jesus says, I am *the Zōn*, he is saying, I am the Living One. I am the one who has life in himself. I am the one who has always been. But in time I entered your world. And I went through what you all must go through. I became dead. I entered your death fully. But death did

not have the final say. Death could not kill my life. I am the Zōn. Life is in me. Forever. So fear nothing. If you are in the Zōn, you have life eternal from me. Death is not the end, it's only a pass through to more life. I am the Zōn. The Living One, alive forevermore.

A few weeks ago, I had a profound spiritual moment reading this passage. I felt as if Jesus were speaking to me: “No fear Gerrit! Fear paralyzes you. But you fear the wrong things:

You fear frailty. You fear failing. You fear shame.

You fear running out of money and not having enough.

You fear that you are just one step ahead of the jailer and he's coming on fast.

You fear pain. You fear a diagnosis. You fear illness and dying.

You fear being discovered as a fraud.

You fear being ignored.

You fear missing out on something.

You fear being left behind, left alone, left to yourself, or just plain left.

You lie on the ground like you have no life because you are filled with fears.

But then he laid his right hand upon me. The hand of power. The hand that wields the scepter. The King's hand. The hand of authority from the one who speaks the truth. “Fear not. No fear. No phobias! I am the first and the last: I hold it all in my hands. I am the Zōn. I am the Living One. I faced the fears you face. I took them all. I let the worst fears of the human race be realized in me.

I went without food in the wilderness.

I felt rejection from family and friends.

I got disgraced by authorities.

I got snatched away from people I loved.

I got called a fraud.

I got unjustly accused and wrongfully convicted.

I felt pain like no one has felt.

I felt forsaken in isolation no one has known.

I sank under the power of death.

Everything you ever feared I *experienced*. I didn't just play at this. I *became* dead. That's who I was from Friday to Sunday. A dead god. A holy man laden with sin. A forsaken savior. All fears were realized in me. The worst of the worst happened. I became dead. But behold. Look. Look here! I am alive. I am Zōn. Alive forevermore.

“So you need have no fear. The only thing you need to consider is whether or not you are in the Zōn. In me. For apart from me, you are on your own. You

face all those fears knowing that they might come true. Knowing that eventually they *will* come true. You will grow frail and you will fall; you will fail and you will be hurt. That cannot be avoided. But will you do that on your own? Relying only on your frail and failing self? Will you keep on trying to be independent, the big man, the smart man, the unbowed man? Or will you get in the Zōn? Will you entrust your life to me so that you can live beyond fear? You don't have the keys to death. Only I do. You don't have the keys to life. Only I do. I am Zōn. I am life. Will you place your life in mine and become alive, now and forevermore, to live each day without fear because now you are included in my victory?"

Let's go back to the year 452. One of the world's great military leaders was bearing down on the city of Rome. Attila the Hun had crossed the Danube River. The city of Rome was paralyzed in fear. The people were terrorized. Centuries of wealth and excess had created a people who had lost their inner fortitude. They didn't know how to find peace when the external structures were decaying around them. This seemed like the end of the world. But a man went out to meet Attila the Hun. The man who went out was not a general. He was not the emperor. He was not a senator or a business man or a gladiator. He was a bishop. Leo was the bishop of Rome and he faced down the fierce warrior from the east. He negotiated a peace and Attila the Hun withdrew. For a few more decades, Rome would endure.

This remarkable Christian named Leo had an eternal perspective. He was beyond fear for he lived in the Zōn. In fact, Leo could look out on a decaying society and see opportunity for the gospel. Rather than falter in the fading glory of Rome, Leo was buoyant. He believed that Christ had defeated the devil and death, and that his victory was winning in the world. He knew we are in a battle with the evil one and that the stakes are high. But he also knew who holds the keys. One year, at the beginning of Lent, as the people prepared for Easter, he preached a remarkable message. Listen to what he said:

Certainly, we need to be on guard all the year round against the enemy of our salvation, never leaving any point exposed to the tempter; but in this season greater prudence and wariness are called for. Satan is raging against us with fierce hatred.

The reason for this is that these are the days when the power of his ancient hold over us is being taken away from him and countless captives are being rescued from his grasp. Men and women, young and old, boys and girls, are being snatched away from him, born again in the waters of baptism...

No one is refused on account of sin, because to be born again and to be put right with God is not something to be earned; it is a free gift.

To add to Satan's chagrin, he sees lapsed Christians whom he had previously deceived now returning to the Lord in contrition, washed clean by their tears of repentance and the confession of their sins, reconciled to God and to the community of God's people.

He knows, moreover, that in a few weeks' time, it will be Good Friday all over again, the day of the Lord's passion, and on that day he will be crushed all over again by the power of Christ's cross. And after that will come the Easter Vigil, when all the members of Christ's body will renew their baptismal vows, renouncing him and all his works with a single triumphant voice.¹

The ancient hold of death and Satan upon us has been broken. The fear that plagues us has been taken by Christ the Savior. And now people are getting into the Zōn. They are repenting of their sins, giving their lives to Christ and being washed clean by his blood. Even though it looks like the world has gone mad, the gospel is still powerful. Countless captives are being rescued from the grasp of the evil one. People are leaving fear and entering the Zōn, the life of the risen Jesus. Lapsed Christians are now returning to the Lord in contrition, stepping back into the Zōn, stepping away from themselves and into Christ.

The power of our celebrations remains as true now as it did in Leo's day. On Good Friday, Satan saw himself crushed all over again by the power of Christ's cross. And on Easter, Jesus' resurrection defeats the fear of death again. In Leo's day as now, Easter Day is a great day for baptisms. And the tradition had already begun to ask all the people to renew the vows taken for them at baptism. Vows very like the ones we use: Do you renounce evil and the power of sin? Do you turn to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? In other words, do you step out of life in yourself, life on your own, trying to be your own master and savior? Do you step into the Zōn? Do you entrust yourself to your faithful savior Jesus Christ for forgiveness, for eternal life and for the end of fear?

Dear ones, on this day of days, let us say No to Satan and sin and Yes to Jesus with all our hearts. Let's get in the Zōn!

¹ Leo the Great (d. 461), Sermon 49, On Lent, as quoted in and translated by Anne Field, *The Binding of the Strong Man* (Ann Arbor: Word of Life, 1976), p. 57