

“PRELUDE TO APOCALYPSE”

Luke 9:28-36; Acts 1:1-11 ¹

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Resurrection Day

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In February, 1941, the Nazis arrested a Polish Monk named Maximilian Kolbe and sent him to Auschwitz. At Auschwitz, Father Kolbe was assigned to Barracks 14, where he served as an informal pastor to his fellow prisoners in their foul and crowded quarters.

As Father Kolbe’s emaciated arm made the sign of the cross over his new parishioners, he thought to himself, “The cross! Christ’s cross has triumphed over its enemies in every age. In the end, even in these darkest days in Poland, the cross will triumph over the swastika. I pray that I can be faithful to that end.”

Then one night a man escaped from Barracks 14. The next morning, Commandant Fritsch forced the phantom-thin prisoners from Barracks 14 to stand still in the hot sun all day long. As dusk came, the Commandant screamed at the men, “The fugitive has not been found. Ten of you will die for him . . . in the starvation bunker!”

Neither food nor water was provided to men in the starvation bunker. Anything was better than this, even death on the gallows or in the gas chambers. As the ten doomed men were chosen, one of them cried out, “My poor children! My wife! What will they do?”

Suddenly there was commotion in the ranks. One of the prisoners had broken out of ranks and now stood before the Commandant. The frail man said softly, “I would like to die in this man’s place. Let him live.” It was Father Kolbe.

The Commandant allowed the exchange, life for life, and the ten men were marched to Barracks 11, where they would spend their dying days. As those days passed, the camp became aware of something extraordinary happening in the death cell.

In the past, prisoners in Barracks 11 had spent their last days howling and attacking one another in a frenzy of despair; but now, those outside heard the sound of singing. This time, the prisoners had a shepherd to lead them gently through the valley of the shadow of death, pointing them to the Great Shepherd who stood at the end of their journey.

Franciszek Gajowniczek (Fran-si-zhek Guy-yov-ni-check) was the prisoner whose life was spared. He survived Auschwitz and lived for fifty-three years more, years during which he joyously told nearly everyone he met about the man who had chosen to die in his place.³

That’s the story we tell this morning, too, isn’t it? The film, *The Passion of the Christ*,⁴ brutally reminds us of the unspeakable suffering Jesus endured in our place—in my place—we need to always remember the awful price at which we have been set free. Let us live each day that is given to us as though that matters.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 12, 2020. Resurrection Day.

² A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 12, 2020. Resurrection Day.

³ Charles Colson and Ellen Vaughn, “Flame of Hope,” quoted and adapted from “Being in the Body,” *Servant Magazine*, vol. 67, pp. 6-8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian_Kolbe

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Passion_of_the_Christ

As important, as essential, as central, as world-changing as Jesus' Crucifixion continues to be for all time, I want to focus our attention this morning on three other scenes, the first of which took place on the Mount of Transfiguration in the text that Andrew read earlier.

Jesus' Transfiguration is the first "Prelude to Apocalypse" we'll look at. As you probably know, "apocalypse" means "uncovering," "revealing," or "revelation." We'll consider the Apocalypse to which I refer after we think about its two prequels.

Jesus' amazing metamorphosis on the Mount of Transfiguration shows us that the unseen world is quite nearby rather than far, far away. This unseen world is populated by angels and by redeemed humans who have experienced resurrection. And here we see that God's true Being, when not veiled in human flesh, is radiant and dazzling beyond our imagining.

A few weeks later, on the Sunday after His Crucifixion—on April 5, A.D.33—Jesus burst forth from the tomb in a triumphant Victory over Death, and that is the Prelude to Apocalypse that we celebrate once more this morning. And in the first chapter of the book of Acts, Luke wrote that "*During the forty days after his crucifixion [and resurrection], [Jesus] appeared to the apostles from time to time and proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive. On these occasions he talked to them about the Kingdom of God*" (v. 3).⁵

It's not my purpose this morning to examine the many compelling evidences for the factuality of Jesus' Resurrection. Let me simply refer to the affirmation that Jesus "*proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive,*" and remind you that eleven of the twelve disciples were eventually executed for their unwavering testimony that Jesus had returned from death. As Chuck Colson put it, "Men do not choose to die for something they know is a lie." Yes, my friends, Jesus of Nazareth, only begotten Son of the Living God, rose from death! He is alive today, and He is here, now!

To go back just a bit, you and I tend to pay close attention to people's dying words, because those last words are often highly significant. The Gospel writers paid very close attention to what Jesus said at the Last Supper, because those were Jesus' "last words" before His death. But the truth of the matter is that Acts 1:4-8 contains Jesus' very last words to His disciples.

In those verses, Jesus told His disciples four things: (1) I will come again to take you Home; (2) you will not know ahead of time when I am coming; (3) until I return, you are to be busy about inviting others all over the planet to enter the Kingdom of God; and (4) I will give you the power you need in order to accomplish this.

And so, as you and I sit here this morning, these are four things we know for sure: (1) Jesus is coming again; (2) there will be no warning of His arrival; (3) we have work to do until He comes; and (4) God will give us the power we need to do this work. Let's look at these briefly.

One of the many stunning scenes in *The Passion of the Christ* takes place during Jesus' first mockery of a trial before the High Priest. This scene is recorded in Matthew 26:62-64: "*Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, 'Well, aren't you going to answer these charges? What do you have to say for yourself?' But Jesus remained silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I demand in the name of the living God that you tell us whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God.'*"

"*Jesus replied, 'Yes, it is as you say. And in the future you will see me, the Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven.'*" Jesus was quoting the prophet Daniel (7:13), and this was a clear claim to be God's Messiah.

⁵ See also 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.

The court of the Sanhedrin understood it as such, and promptly condemned Jesus to death (Matthew 26:65-66).

When Jesus spoke about “*coming back on the clouds of heaven,*” He was referring to the Grand Apocalypse to which His Transfiguration and His Resurrection were prelude.⁶ In Mark 13:24-27 we read that “*At that time, after those horrible days end, the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then everyone will see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds with great power and glory. And he will send forth his angels to gather together his chosen ones from all over the world—from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.*”

Jesus’ resurrection, as amazing and world-changing as it is, is no more than the prelude to God’s coming Apocalypse. God’s complete, final, ultimate Purpose is the creation of God’s Eternal Kingdom, where the present order of things will have passed away, and God’s dwelling will once again be with us. Eden’s curse will be no more!

My friend, Verlin Kruschwitz, once preached that Jesus made four things out of the rugged and bloody wood of Calvary’s cross: (1) He made a balance beam on which to show the infinite and eternal worth of every person created in His image; (2) He made a coffin in which to bury sin and death forever; (3) He made a ladder that takes us to heaven, let down from the top; and (4) He made a throne on which He will reign forever as King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Make no mistake about it. Jesus is **alive**, and He’s coming again! And as the angels told those first believers, “*someday, just as you saw Him go, He will return!*” (Acts 1:11).

That raises the question, of course, about when Jesus will return. I quite often hear persons state their conviction that the end of all things is near. While that may, in fact, be true, believers in every age have had the conviction that they themselves were the terminal generation.

The Bible does tell us some things about Christ’s return pretty clearly, most of which are variations on what Jesus said in Acts 1: “*The Father sets those dates, and they are not for you to know*” (Acts 1:7). On another occasion, Jesus said, “*No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don’t know when they will happen, stay alert and keep watch*” (Mark 13:32-33).

Jesus said that the stunning suddenness of His return will be like that of a thief in the night, like lightning in a terrible storm, like the rain that became Noah’s flood, like the terrible judgment that fell from the sky on Sodom. Jesus’ most important statement on the subject can be found in Luke 12:40: “**You must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected.**”⁷

⁶ Revelation 19:11-16 gives us a glimpse of the Resurrected Jesus as He prepares for His promised return: *Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. And the one sitting on the horse was named Faithful and True. For he judges fairly and then goes to war. His eyes were bright like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. A name was written on him, and only he knew what it meant. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood [it was His own blood, sacrificed for us], and his title was the Word of God. The armies of heaven, dressed in pure white linen, followed him on white horses. From his mouth came a sharp sword, and with it he struck down the nations. He ruled them with an iron rod, and he trod the winepress of the fierce wrath of almighty God. On his robe and thigh was written this title: King of kings and Lord of lords.*

⁷ I could certainly be mistaken, but it seems to me that if it really were important for us to have all the details related to the end times, God would surely have given them to us in a clearer fashion. W. T. Conner, a prominent Baptist theologian, wrote: There has been, and is yet, great diversity of opinion in regard to the return of Christ to the earth. . . . One should not be too dogmatic where it is evidently so easy to miss the way; and when one has pronounced convictions, he should have due respect for good and

May 19, 1780 was a remarkably dark day in New England. Candles were re-lit in many houses. The birds were silent, and chickens returned to roost in the middle of the day. The Connecticut legislature was in session in Hartford, and the House of Representatives, being unable to transact business because of the darkness, adjourned. Many people thought that the Day of Judgment had arrived.

As the state Senate debated whether or not to adjourn, Colonel Abraham Davenport famously commented, “I am against an adjournment. The Day of Judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought.”⁸ The real question for us, then, is what it is that is our duty until the King returns.

There are in fact many things for us to be doing, chief among which is obedience to Jesus’ command moments before He ascended back into heaven: “*But when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will receive power and will tell people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8).

There is much that could be said about this task, but I want to illustrate it by telling two stories that show how easily you and I can tell others about our Risen Lord. Greg Huffer, of Lebanon, Indiana, told this story about something that happened to him in a McDonald’s drive through:

“After placing my order, I came to the drive-up window to pay. I noticed an attractive, hand-carved cross hanging from the clerk’s neck, so I commented, ‘I like your cross.’

“Her reply was a lesson to me in how simple it is to share one’s testimony. She said: ‘Thank you. I like the person who died on it for my sins. And I love the person who rose from the grave after having died on the cross for my sins.’⁹

“She easily could have left it at ‘Thank you,’ Greg wrote, ‘but her faithful witness touched me and drew me even closer to the Lord that day.’ That wasn’t too hard to do was it? Or how about this story, told by Timothy Johnson of Bowie, Maryland, not far from us:

“I was entering Baltimore/Washington International Airport for a business trip. As the security screener looked through my bag, I noticed that he was wearing a silver ring with a cross on it. I commented on the ring, and he made this response as he kept looking through my bag: ‘Yeah, the ring. It means I’m a follower of Jesus. You know, in my job, one of the things we worry about is dynamite. But do you know where that word comes from? It’s from the Greek word *dunamis*, which means ‘power.’

“‘As a Christian, I know that all of the power belongs to God. That’s why he sent Jesus. So while I’m doing my job, I know that He is doing His job. That’s where I put all of my trust. It all belongs to Him, and He’s here with us. Well, Mr. Johnson, have a great trip,’ he said before moving on to the next person.

honest brethren who hold opposite opinions (W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1937], p. 307).

My former pastor, Welton Gaddy: “Authors regularly publish books about the imminent end, claiming to know what Jesus said He did not know. Interestingly, most of them purchase a copyright for their publications—just in case, I suppose. Quite frankly, I think I know as much about the specific details and date of Christ’s coming as any of these people, Hal Lindsey included, and I do not know enough about it to fill one page in a very small book. I am content, however, to be silent where the New Testament is silent.”

⁸ http://www.stamfordhistory.org/dav_abraham1.htm

⁹ This and the next story come from www.preachingtoday.com.

“I walked away with a smile, thinking about how this man had so naturally taken advantage of the opportunity to share his faith. It certainly wasn’t the place for an extended conversation. There was a long line of people behind me, and he had plenty of work to do. But in less than thirty seconds, he spoke about his faith to a total stranger, calmly, confidently, and without hesitation.” That’s what we’re supposed to be doing when Jesus returns!

My friends, Jesus’ Transfiguration and His Resurrection really are God’s Prelude to Apocalypse. For some, Jesus’ return will be a time of terror, not because of some arbitrary decision on God’s part, but because of the cumulative effects of the decisions of their lives. God really does honor our freedom to reject Him.

For others, Jesus’ return will mark the completion of our salvation. Having accepted Jesus as Savior and followed Him as Lord, we’ll respond with singing, dancing, and celebration when He appears!

Pastor David Peterson was working on a sermon when his little daughter came in with the request, “Daddy, can we play?”

He answered, “I’m awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I’m right in the middle of preparing this sermon. I can play in about an hour.”

She said, “Okay, Daddy, when you’re finished, I’m going to give you a great big hug!”

David’s daughter was almost out of the room when she wheeled around and attacked him with a bone-breaking hug, after which he said, “Darling you said you were going to give me a hug after I finished!”

And she answered, “*Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!*”¹⁰ That’s what God’s Prelude to Apocalypse does for us: it helps us know what we have to look forward to!

Jesus told us three things very clearly about His Return, about God’s Final Apocalypse:

1. I am coming.
2. You cannot know when I will come.
3. You need to be ready for that moment.

A little girl had heard about Jesus’ Return in Sunday School, and she asked her mother about it when they got home.

“Mommy, do you believe Jesus will come back?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Could He come this week?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Could He come today?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Could He come in the next hour?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Could He come in a few minutes?”

“Yes, dear.”

¹⁰ Dale Bruner, “Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?” *Theology, News, and Notes* (October 1999), 3.

“Mommy, would you comb my hair?”¹¹

Franciszek Gajowniczek (Fran-si-zhek Guy-yov-ni-check) spent his life telling the story of Father Kolbe, who sacrificed himself that Franciszek might live. Jesus went to the Cross so that He might have the joy of spending eternity with you, and He stands even now—right now—with arms outstretched, at the end of the Journey (Hebrews 12:2). Tell somebody!

“Jesus is coming to earth again; what if it were today?
Coming in power and love to reign; what if it were today?
Coming to claim his chosen Bride; all the redeemed and purified,
Over this whole earth, scattered wide, what if it were today?”

¹¹ Don Hussong, *Leadership*, Vol. 4, no. 3.