

## **The Alpha and Omega**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Revelation 1: 4-8

Delivered on April 28, 2019 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

From about December of 1978 until June of 1987 I lived a town about twenty miles North of Atlanta which is spelled R-O-S-W-E-L-L. Now, I am spelling it instead of pronouncing it because there is no neutral way to pronounce it. That is, there is no way to pronounce it without taking sides. If you are a native of that town, that is to say if you come from a family that spent two or more generations in that town going back to when it was a village with no more than one or two stoplights and one or two paved roads, then you call it ROSwell—ROSwell, Georgia. But if you came there sometime after World War II because you along with about 100,000 other like-minded people thought it was a nice bedroom community to build a house in some development where you couldn't tell your house apart from any other house, then you call it RosWELL—RosWELL, Georgia. In the late seventies and early eighties, I remember that I quickly learned there was a big difference between people who said ROSwell, and people who said RosWELL. In general, and of course there are many exceptions to this, but in general, the people who said RosWELL looked down on the people who said ROSwell. They saw the people who said ROSwell as unsophisticated country people, people who they might call hurtful names like “hayseed, bumpkin, hick.” But the people who said ROSwell generally didn't think much of those who said RosWELL, either. They saw them as intruders, outsiders, and they mocked their accents and strange dialects that often came from far off places like New York, New Jersey, and even somewhere called Ohio. And I also learned that those who said ROSwell didn't recognize those other folks as having a real right to live in this town. Why? Because the natives, the people who said ROSwell were their first. They were there first.

There is a real power in firsts and beginnings, isn't there? How many people do you know who don't feel like they know anything about who they are unless they know where they came from? Websites on the internet like ANCESTRY.com have become so popular because people feel that to know about whether their ancestors are from Ireland or Scotland or Italy or whether they are descended from princes or paupers tells them something important about who they are, even if they should trace their ancestry back centuries to a time and place that they know nothing about. Beginnings have some kind of authority over us, don't they?

But we aren't just that way about beginnings, we are also that way about endings. I can recall that I was in my first parish when someone who was in that church who didn't like me very much said to me "Pastor Rich, I was here long before you came and I will be here long after you're gone." I said "You're probably right." But that was his way of saying that he was more important to that church than I was. I was just passing through. In the whole history of that church, he would matter a lot more than I would.

Today in our New Testament lesson we find ourselves in a time after Christ has been raised from the dead, at the beginning of the book of Revelation where John who is the author of this book has been exiled to the isle of Patmos. John is exiled there because he is being persecuted for being a Christian. And as he is in exile, the word of God comes to him through the risen Christ himself as he says "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." Now, if you were ever in a fraternity or a sorority, you know that Alpha is the first letter in the Greek alphabet and Omega is the last letter. So it is as if Christ is saying "I am the A and the Z, the first and the last." And the book of Revelation begins with these words because it is as if Christ is identifying himself in order to say to John write these words down

because God is speaking to you. And when we think of this as being something that the God of the universe would say, it doesn't strike us anything unusual. Of course the God of the universe is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, for what else does it mean to be the God of the universe? If the word of the Lord came to John and said "I am the God of the universe and I'm only going to be around for about a month" that would be unusual, but there is nothing unusual about the divine saying I have always been and I always will be.

But what is unusual about the gospel is this. The one who is speaking to John and claiming the authority of the divine is not someone who came to dominate and humiliate the entire world, but it is one who came to be a humble servant to the entire creation. It is none other than Jesus Christ, and it is the same Jesus Christ who is the servant we meet in the gospels. The one who washed the disciple's feet, the one who came to be baptized instead of baptize. It is indeed even the one, who as it says in Philippians humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And that might strike us as odd, because servants seem to be people who don't deliberately bring attention to themselves or blow their own horns, but they are behind the scenes helping other people. It is the nature of servants not to glorify themselves but to glorify others. And all of that means that servants will be people who are forgotten. They are people who don't care about having their names on plaques or their likeness preserved in statues of bronze for all the world to remember. As you are surely aware, four of our nations Presidents have their images preserved on Mount Rushmore. I have never personally been to Mount Rushmore, but if you have and you stood there taking it all in, maybe it occurred to you that a thousand years from now, even if the United States ceases to exist, their images will still stand

on top of Mount Rushmore, but I know of no Mount Rushmore for butlers, or maids, or gardeners, servants are usually forgotten.

But that is not what the gospel tells us, the message of the gospel is that the one who came to be the servant of all is the one who was here before the mountains were formed and is the one who will be here when the mountains are washed to the sea.

There is nothing wrong with a desire to be remembered. There is nothing wrong with a desire to somehow be connected to the beginning of time, while at the same time being connected to the end of time. But in the church we proclaim that this desire can be misplaced when this desire to be connected to eternity somehow turns into a desire to be like God. Way back in the garden of Eden, when Eve was told not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the serpent tempted Eve by saying the reason God doesn't want you to eat this fruit is because he knows that it will make you like God. So the serpent knew that Eve in her human nature wanted to be like God as we all want to be like God. So she ate the fruit and gave part of it to Adam to eat, and this desire to be like God is how sin entered the world.

For think about it, isn't everything we could ever do against God just a desire on our parts to be like God? Isn't every form of rebellion against God, every form of saying "You aren't going to tell me what to do God!" isn't all of this just a way of trying to be like God ourselves?

The funny thing is, though, that this desire to be like God will never work. No matter how much we strive to make ourselves the Alpha and the Omega, in time we will all be forgotten. Even Mount Rushmore will turn to dust one day. Not for quite a while, but one day. But by living and serving others in the name of Jesus Christ, what we can do is cultivate a close

relationship with God, and that will fulfill this misplaced desire to be like God like nothing else can. That will fulfill this desire to be connected to all eternity like nothing else can.

In his sermon “The Drum Major Instinct” Martin Luther King said these words that are worth thinking about if you have never heard them or thought about them before. He said “if any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don’t want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. And every now and then I wonder what I want them to say. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Prize, that isn’t important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards—that’s not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I’d like them to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I’d like somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody. I want you to say on that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say on that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind. And that’s all I want to say.”

Sadly, most if not everyone who heard that sermon delivered was around on the day when Dr. King met his maker. For those remarks were delivered on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1968, just two months to the day before King’s life would be taken from him in Memphis, Tennessee. But those words would be played at Dr. King’s funeral in Atlanta five days later, and I would submit to you that they remain immortal words for anyone who strives to live in the name of Jesus Christ.

I have been an ordained minister now for almost twenty years. Before that I spent three years as a seminary student, so I suppose I've been involved in some kind of ministry now for twenty-three years and eleven of those years have been as a full-time pastor. In those twenty-three years, I have spoken with many people as they faced their final days of life lying on their death beds. I don't know how many, I've never tried to count how many. But in all that time, while I have heard many of those people say they are leaving this life without a single regret, I have sometimes heard people say they wish they had had more time to do this or to do that. And they have said things to me like they wish they had spent more time with their spouse or they wish they had spent more time with their children or they wish they'd spent more time with their grandchildren, or they wish they'd spent more time seeing all the wonders of the world. But I have never once, never once heard someone say they wished they had more rewards, or they wish they had more degrees, or they wish they had a better title, or they wish they had more money. Maybe one day that will happen, but it hasn't happened yet. Trying to be the Alpha and the Omega will not work. It won't work. But what will work is living in the name of the Alpha and the Omega by being a servant as he was a servant, being humble as he was humble, being merciful as he is merciful, being all these things as he was and is and will be.