

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Church Alive

Revelation 3:1-6

The message on the sign at Sardis Community Church communicated the congregation's enthusiastic perception of itself: "Come Experience a Church Alive." And on the congregation's Facebook page, lots of the comments and reviews conveyed the same sense of excitement: "We like having multiple worship services to choose from on Sunday morning." "We love the coffee bar in the church lobby." "The music always gets me revved up and energized." "There's some type of program or activity going on virtually every night. The list of options seems endless." Of course, all these comments had a "Thumbs Up/"Like" button next to them.

But a few lines down was a different opinion, accompanied by a "Thumbs Down/Dislike" button. It began: "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." What a negative review. That's no way to build up the fellowship of believers and strengthen their mission. Who would say such a thing about a community of Christ's followers? In this case, the opinion came from Christ himself.

In the second and third chapters of Revelation, there's a collection of seven church health assessments, issued by the risen Lord Jesus himself. Each one is addressed to the community of disciples in a particular city in Asia Minor. Overall, Christ's message is a mixture of positive and negative conclusions. Some of the churches get mostly compliments and few, if any, criticisms. Some get a lot less praise and a lot more blame. Others get a pretty even blend of promise and warning.

Christ's report to the church in Sardis starts out with a reminder that no matter how they may rate themselves, they're always under his oversight. So what counts most isn't their perception of themselves but the risen Lord's perception of them. And his comprehension of who they are is full and complete. "I know your deeds," says the exalted Jesus. Nothing is hidden from him. His eyes see through the veneer of success that gives their church a solid reputation in the community. Christ's gaze penetrates beyond their LED church sign, their large budget, and their busy calendar of services and activities.

Now don't misunderstand, Christ's beef with the Sardis fellowship isn't that they're a large congregation. Small churches, big churches, and churches of any size in between, can settle into a state of complacency and spiritual lethargy. What bothers Jesus isn't that the Sardis fellowship is a large church, but that it's a dead church.

Calvin Coolidge, our nation's thirtieth President, was known as a very quiet and reserved man. Many perceived him as stiff and emotionless. He rarely took part in casual conversation, and often answered questions with just a few words, earning him the nickname, "Silent Cal." When Coolidge died in 1933, word spread across the airwaves. Columnist Dorothy Parker was in her office at *The New Yorker* when a colleague flung open the door and blurted, "Dottie, did you hear? Coolidge is dead." Parker shot back, "How can they tell?"

During his life, Calvin Coolidge had a reputation for deadness, though he was alive. Compare that to the church in Sardis, which has a reputation for aliveness, though it is dead. The church itself can't see that. In its own eyes, the congregation is very much alive. In the eyes of its denomination, the church is vibrant. In the eyes of the community, the church is prosperous and strong. But in the eyes of its Lord, this church is weak and near death. There's barely a pulse. One commentator takes things a step further when he says, "The appearance [of the Sardis church] is that of a beautifully adorned corpse in a funeral parlour, and the Lord is not deceived."¹

"I know you," says Christ. These are both reassuring and unsettling words. We're comforted that our Lord cares about and is committed to our life as his people. But at the same time we're disrupted by the awareness that he scrutinizes our attitudes and actions, to see if we're embodying holiness. Remember that Christ's objective is for us to be like him. And who is he? Early in the book of Revelation he tells us: "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!" (1:17-18).

Eric Reed tells about how, following an Easter service in 2003, a woman approached a pastor he knows and asked, "So what happened with Jesus after the Resurrection?" "Well, he ascended into heaven and he's still alive," the pastor said. "I know he was resurrected, but he's alive?" she said. "Yes, he's alive," replied the pastor. "Alive? ALIVE?! Why didn't you tell me?!" Then, for the next two weeks, she telephoned everyone she knew and exclaimed, "Jesus is alive! Did you know he's alive?!"²

I'm not sure how that woman had managed to separate Jesus' resurrection from his aliveness, but her reaction certainly reminds us that Easter is more than a one-Sunday-a-year announcement. As I've stressed, in one way or another, during each of my sermons this month, we're continually reflecting on the significance of the resurrection, for our individual lives and our collective life as the church. Our Lord is a living Lord. He is defined by the resurrection, by his aliveness. So it only makes sense that a living Jesus expects a living church.

And it makes further sense that a living Jesus will hold us accountable for those areas of our individual lives and our church life where deadness has set in. After all, who knows more about giving life to the dead than a risen Savior? He wants to give of his life, to share of his life, with us. But that also involves naming the forms of death that get into us, his people.

Sometimes deadness sets in because our love for the Lord and our passion for his purposes grows lackluster and stale. Sometimes we become lifeless because we focus on our human efforts to fix what's wrong with the world, rather than preaching and teaching the good news of God's saving action in Christ. Sometimes we settle into deadness because we resist change and prefer the safety and security of church as it is. Sometimes the life goes out of church because we grow tired, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

And sometimes the power of death takes hold in the congregation because we're satisfied with just going through the motions of religious life. We aim for nothing more than meeting the minimum requirements of church. We claim the name of Christ without really wanting to be changed into the likeness of Christ. We're busy with the externals of religious activity, but the power that raised Jesus from the dead just isn't there.

In an interview with a long-time friend, international pop superstar Bono, talked about the sometimes-stained reputation of the church throughout history. He said:

Religion can be the enemy of God. It's often what happens when God, like Elvis, has left the building. A list of instructions where there was once conviction; dogma where once people

just did it; a congregation led by a man where once they were led by the Holy Spirit. Discipline replacing discipleship.³

It's hard to put a finger on exactly what was going on in the church at Sardis. As best we can tell, they weren't experiencing any great persecution. There was no major opposition to their message or resistance to their way of life. But perhaps that in itself points to the problem. Maybe they were so conformed to the social and cultural standards of their society that there was no reason for anyone to criticize them or contest them. In other words, their church was filled more with a spirit of compromise than with the Spirit of God.

In our own day and time, the living Lord, who wants a living church, still warns us about the dangers of going too far in compromising with contemporary culture. The Lord knows us. He knows our deeds. He especially condemns our habits and practices of making idols out of things that don't have the power to save. He calls us to account us for the ways that we live by popular definitions of success, power, sexuality, and wealth. The living Lord holds us responsible for taking the easy way of blending in rather than the costly way of the cross.

Clovis Chapell tells a story about a young pastor who was known for doing eccentric things. After several years of serving in his first church, he grew discouraged and finally told his congregation that their church was dead. He announced that on the next Sunday, he intended to do a funeral for the congregation, and invited Chapell to attend. When Sunday morning came, the worshipers saw that their pastor had placed a casket right in the front of the pulpit. He stood by the casket and began his sermon by saying, "Now some of you may not agree with me that our church is dead—so in order to convince you I am going to ask you to come forward and view the remains." One by one, they filed by, and when they looked down inside the casket they saw that the pastor had placed a mirror in the bottom, so that when they looked in everyone saw their own reflection.

When the risen Jesus speaks to us, his people, his church, he doesn't just tap us gently on the shoulder or whisper softly in our ear. Instead, he issues the rousing command, "Wake up!" His aim is to move us into action. Action that begins by seeing what he sees when he looks at us. And that includes looking at ourselves to see those places where deadness has overcome aliveness in our lives and in our church. Once we recognize our spiritual lethargy, the answer isn't to try to be more religious. The answer is to have the power that raised Jesus to raise us up and enliven us for greater holiness.

The living Lord says to the church in Sardis, and to us, "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent" (v. 3a). Jesus holds out to us the possibility of genuine revival and real change. That requires seeing ourselves as he sees us. And that means seeing the ways that an increasingly secular culture resists the gospel, as well as seeing the ways that we ourselves compromise with many of the values of our culture. The good news is that the Lord is still in the business of rescuing us from death. So as you and I turn away from sin and turn toward him in obedience, the challenges and circumstances that seem so threatening and deadly for us can actually become opportunities for growth, change, renewal, perseverance, and deepening faith. He who has an ear, let him hear what the risen Jesus says to our church.

¹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, quoted by Paul Kroll, "Sardis: The 'Dead' Church (Revelation 3:1-6)." Grace Communion International website. 2002. Accessed April 25, 2018 <<https://www.gci.org/bible/rev/sardis>>.

² Eric Reed, *Leadership Weekly* (April 13, 2004).

³ Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).