

When The Cat's Away

MATTHEW 24:42-50 (NRSV) *Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. ⁴⁵Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? ⁴⁶Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. ⁴⁷Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'My master is delayed,' ⁴⁹and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know.* Title Slide

Thursday, April 22, 1959 is etched into my memory. I was a junior in high school, and at three o'clock I was in English class. It was warm, and the windows were open. Next door the chemistry class was experimenting with sulphuric acid, and the smell of rotten eggs swam through the humidity and flooded my senses.

We were studying *Silas Marner*; but Mrs. Leake finally gave up. None of us was paying attention. Our attention was on those open windows.

A highly publicized group had predicted the rapture would happen that day—that Christ would return to a hill just outside Mexia, Texas, near Waco. The hill was called Mt. Carmel. It all was supposed to go down at 3:00, April 22, 1959.

3:00 o'clock came and went. Nothing happened. At 3:30 the bell rang and we headed for home. I drove home with one eye on the road and one eye on the sky.

People all over the country sold homes, bought tents and gathered at Mt. Carmel to spend their last days worshipping and studying the Word. Nothing happened. The next day, headlines screamed: "Jesus a 'No-Show' at Mexia."

I've often wondered what happened to the faith of all those people.

In 1935 a washing machine salesman named Victor Houteff started a splinter group of Seventh Day Adventists called Davidians. He prophesied that The End would be soon, but never set a date. After his death, his widow Florence set a date: April 22, 1959. When the prophecy proved inaccurate, a small remnant of Davidians remained there and continued to preach the immanent Second Coming.

Twenty-two years later Howell, a semi-literate, failed rock guitarist named Vernon Wayne Howell was excommunicated from the SDA church in Tyler, Texas, and joined the Davidians. He fought for leadership, engineered a split in the Branch and moved his splinter group to Palestine, Texas. From there he launched a barrage of legal procedures, and in March 1988, after a shootout, Howell successfully gained control of the Mt. Carmel Complex, and changed his name to David Koresh. You probably know... the rest of the story.

If you type www.unsignedmysteries.com/usm449625 into your computer, you'll find a website that documents hundreds of similar stories.

These stories are a disgrace Christianity in general, and make it very difficult to teach from the book of Revelation. You open the book and people remember the last thing they heard about it. All kinds of bizarre images clutter the process—most of which aren't biblical. I don't know; but I'd guess that more Christians have read the *Left Behind* series than have read the book of Revelation. Current understanding seems more closely to reflect that bestseller than the Bible.

Still, 318 times the New Testament speaks of Christ returning.

Some say Christ returns at the conversion of every new Christian; he enters that life and makes it new. And that's true.

In another sense Christ returns in great the events of history. Christ is **Lord of History**, and is present in those events.

In still another sense Christ returns at the death of a Christian. We believe that Christ is somehow present in the experience of death.

Some teach that the second coming of Christ was fulfilled at Pentecost. And in a very real sense, that's also true.

But if you read all the New Testament, there simply is no way to avoid the teaching that at some future time, in some way, Christ will somehow manifest himself for all the world to recognize, and history will be brought to fulfillment.

When will this happen? The Bible doesn't say. In fact, it says "...no man **will** know the hour or the day... not even the Son of Man!"

How will it happen? Again, the Bible doesn't say—or if it does, it isn't clear. If it were clear there'd not be so many variations.

People asked Jesus the same questions, and he never gave a straight answer. In today's text and in the three parables that follow, Jesus responds to their questions with a question: "Whenever, or however it happens, will you be ready?"

The Parable of the Talents begins: "*...(the kingdom of heaven) will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey.*"

Did you ever leave your kids at home while you went off to run some errands? They're going to fight! I remember just hoping mine wouldn't break anything valuable. Themselves—O.K. They'll heal. Just don't destroy my old record collection—my 45's of Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey! If we gave them a job to do while we were gone, we knew it wouldn't be done when we got back. And somebody always got hurt. We always returned to teary eyes and runny noses. I had visions of them doing swan dives

off the old upright piano...

Bill Cosby turned out other than he appeared to be for decades; but his theory is helpful. He says kids are "brain-damaged." You don't have to tell fish to stay in the water. They know! Chickens know when to go to bed. Raccoons know to wash their hands before eating. But kids; you have to explain it over and over and over in minute detail: step-by-step, move-by-move... And they still can find more loopholes than a New York Lawyer! "But, you didn't say, 'Don't do that!'"

I remember when I was a kid and my parents left the house for awhile! "Now, kids, we'll only be gone an hour or so. I want you to clean your room, mow the yard, wash the dishes, vacuum the living room, and do the washing and ironing by the time I get back, or you'll wish you had!"

I'd continue to play, but with one ear, like radar, tuned to the driveway for the sound of tires on gravel. My thinking was that if I was busy when they got home, they'd think I'd been slaving the whole time they were gone."

But my sister was always the fly in the ointment! She'd jump up and get started right away. I'm sure part of her "hyper-diligence" was anxiety about being in trouble if the job didn't get done. But I'm also convinced that part of her motivation was to prove she was better than I. [Maybe you know some Christians who're waiting for the Lord's return with that same mind-set.]

Nor was she above setting me up so that when Mom and Dad got back she could report that she did it all by herself. "Jimmy didn't help." [I know some Christians who're waiting for the Lord's return that way, too.]

After my sister and I got married and left home, Mom and Dad got a Dachshund named "Ebony." When they'd leave the house Ebony would sit on the window ledge in their bedroom, overlooking the driveway, and whine 'til they get back. [You and I both know some Christians who wait for the Lord's return like that.]

But every once in a while when I was growing up—just once in a while—one or the other of us would say, "O.K., let's pitch in and get this stuff done so we don't have to worry about it, and we can get on with playing. Who knows: if we do a good job, maybe we'll get some sort of surprise!"

What a novel idea, for kids at home while their parents are out running errands; or, for employees left in charge while the boss is out; or, for the church while we wait for the Lord (or just the minister) to return: "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions." (Matthew 24:45-47 NIV)