

GLORIOUS JESUS

Revelation 1:4-18

Second Sunday of Easter (Series C)

April 24, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson for the Second Sunday of Easter comes from *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, chapter 1, verses 4 through 18. In this scripture reading, we get a description of Jesus' unfiltered glory. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Revelation 1, beginning at verse 4, we read in Jesus' name.

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

⁹ I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus is glorious. We see his glory in different ways. Throughout the Bible, he manifests his glory differently at different times. During his earthly ministry it was veiled behind his human

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flesh. It was manifested through his miracles. In such cases, people didn't actually see his glory, but they saw what it accomplished, kind of like how you don't actually see the wind, but only the effects of wind. The only time it came out visibly was at his transfiguration. His most glorious work was his crucifixion. But there his glory was thickly veiled behind suffering and shame. His resurrection and the subsequent appearances are more obviously glorious. So the resurrection marks a turning point where Jesus is willing to let his glory be seen a little bit more. But in this appearance to John, Jesus cranks it up to eleven.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ is a fascinating book. And it is well worth our attention. It is an often misunderstood book. Even those whom I think misunderstand it, would agree with me on that. But they would think I misunderstand it. So it's a difficult book. But it's not impossible to understand. Sometimes we have that impression when we deal with something difficult. We think that if many people misunderstand it, then it must be impossible to understand it rightly. But that's not right. It is, of course, possible that some understand it rightly and others misunderstand it, or at least certain parts of it. And especially when we are dealing with the Word of God, we should expect that it can be understood, not because we are capable of ascending to God's level of understanding, but because he desires to make himself known, so he descends to our level. When he speaks, he wants us to know what he's talking about, and he wants us to believe it. So when we find something we don't understand, instead of giving up, we should work to try to understand it. And since it is often misunderstood, we should have the humility to listen to and consider what others think about it.

So I'm going to explain this the way I understand it. And I do think this is correct, otherwise I would have no business believing it. And if it's different than what you think, I hope you will give it fair consideration. And if you think I'm wrong, you can take your turn. Come to adult Sunday school, or come to my office later this week, and tell me how you understand it. And I will try to listen to you for what you actually say, and not what I think you're going to say. That's one of the things we do when we disagree with someone. Since we already think they're wrong, we start preparing our rebuttal while they're still talking, instead of just listening. So then we argue against what we thought they were going to say, instead of what they actually said. It takes more work to hear what a person actually says than what we think they're going to say. So with that in mind, let's dig in.

The first and most important thing to understand about Revelation is that it's about Jesus Christ. This comes from the very first line of the book: "The revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). That's really the title of the book. Most biblical authors don't do this, but John puts the title right in the text. It is *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. So we should expect the book to be about Jesus. It does, of course, contain visions about things that would soon take place (1:1), but it's not so much about those events, as it is about the one who controls those events. It is about Jesus.

The second thing to understand about Revelation is the audience. It was written to specific people toward the end of the First Century. That is, about 90 AD. It was written to the seven churches in what was called "Asia" at the time. As a side note, this is different than what we call "Asia" today. We usually think of Asia as consisting of countries like China, India, Mongolia, and Korea. But in the Roman Empire, "Asia" referred to a region on the north side of the Mediterranean Sea, in present-day Turkey. That's where these seven churches were located. They were in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (1:11). Ephesus, by the way, is where the disciple John spent most of his ministry

before he was sent into exile. So he's writing to his own congregation and the others in the same region. Jesus instructs John to write down what he sees in this book and send it to these seven churches. Chapters 2 and 3 actually contain personal letters from Jesus to each of these seven churches. So these were real churches with real members in real cities, and they had real problems.

And that leads to the third thing to understand about Revelation. And this is the one where we find some disagreement. Revelation isn't so much about things that will happen in the future, at the very end of the age. Instead, it's more about the events these people in these seven churches would experience, especially tribulation and persecution. Some see chapters 4 through 20 as dealing with events that will happen at the very end of the age, mostly within a seven-year window. I think this is a misunderstanding. We should remember that Revelation was written to these seven churches. So it's really about the events they would experience. Chapters 4 through 20 deal with the persecution and tribulation they experienced, and which Christians all around the world since then have experienced. It's a picture of what's happening in heaven while God's people experience persecution and tribulation on this earth. It's written to encourage suffering Christians with the glorious truth that our crucified and risen Savior-King is "the ruler of kings on earth" (1:5).

And that's what we see in this text.

Jesus appears to John. In verse 5, John refers to Jesus as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth." Each of these three descriptions is a comfort to suffering Christians. First, he is "the faithful witness." That is, Jesus faithfully testified the truth concerning God. We are not deceived when we believe his words.

And how do we know this? Because Jesus is "the firstborn of the dead." His resurrection vindicates his teaching. And the title "firstborn" especially indicates that there will be other resurrections. It's like if someone introduces you to their child by saying, "This is my firstborn."

So you say, "Oh, how many kids do you have?"

"Just one."

"Oh, so you mean you hope to have more?"

"No, one is enough."

That would not make much sense, since they introduced their child as their firstborn. "Firstborn" implies that more follow.

And that's what it means when applied to Jesus. He is "the firstborn of the dead." Just as Christ was raised from the dead, those who believe in him will also be raised. Jesus is the pattern for our resurrection.

And the third description of Jesus is "the ruler of kings on earth." This is the one where, when we think about it a little, it might surprise us. But then we will also see how comforting it is. Consider the world as it is today. The rulers and kings of the world act like there is no one above them. They do what they want, sometimes with disastrous results. But they are not sovereign. None of them are. There is no such thing as a sovereign ruler. Every ruler is under the reign of Jesus, even if they do not acknowledge him. It's not even a case of saying that every ruler or king should be subject to Christ, but that every ruler and king is subject to Christ, regardless of whether or not they want to be, and regardless of whether or not they think they are. As evil as they may appear, Jesus uses them for his purposes. So Revelation isn't so much about the future kingdom of Jesus. It does get to that at the very end. But, more so, it is about the

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present kingdom of Jesus. He is “the ruler of kings on earth.” And this is a comfort to suffering Christians, especially those who suffer at the hands of their civil authorities.

John goes on to describe Jesus as “him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (1:5-6). This gets at our real problem, which is not persecution, tribulation, or unjust government, but our sins. Jesus did not die to free us from unjust rulers. That doesn’t require his blood to solve. It only takes his divine power. But his blood frees us from our sins. And having been freed from our sins, he makes us to be a kingdom. We are his kingdom. You are the kingdom he purchased with his blood. And he has made every believer a priest. That is, you have access to God the Father. Just as the priests of the Old Testament approached God with the blood of the sacrifices, so you also approach the Father through the blood of Jesus. You have access to pray to your Father in heaven, and we have access to heaven itself. One day, we will approach the home of God, and we will remain there.

For now, this kingdom of Jesus is hidden from view. He is “the ruler of kings on earth,” but in a hidden way. But it will not always be that way. “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (1:7).

As Christians, we look forward to Christ’s return with anticipation, to the extent that sometimes we wonder why it’s taking so long. But it will not be a gracious experience for all people, and that is why it takes so long. Our Lord desires for more people to come to repentance. But when the day of grace ends, all the tribes of the earth will wail. Those who do not believe, those who refuse to repent, and those who persecute Christ and his Church will mourn and wail. And it’s not simply that they will regret what they did. If it’s a case of them confessing their sin and coming to trust in Jesus, they would not mourn, but they would rejoice that God brought good out of their evil. Instead, they will wail because they will be eternally condemned.

Yet, even this is a comfort for Christians who suffer under persecution. Vengeance belongs to the Lord, and this is good. That might seem odd, or even heartless. God does not wish that any should perish. Nor should we. But there is some comfort in the truth that those who persecute Christ and his Church will suffer. And unless we’ve experienced that persecution, we might not be able to understand this. But for those who suffer for the name of Jesus, they can find comfort in this. Our Lord is not blind to their suffering. He has been through it, and he is near them. And those who beat them, oppress them, or kill their families, will face Jesus’ judgment. This truth helps those who suffer to endure their suffering, knowing that justice will be done in the end. Knowing this helps us to endure it without fighting back. We don’t have to seek vengeance. That is God’s work. This is what it means to “leave room for the wrath of God” (Rom. 12:19). If we belong to Christ, he will take care of it. On the last day, when he appears, “all the tribes of the earth will wail.”

Then John gets into the vision of Jesus. He describes the glory of when he actually saw Jesus, not veiled in humility, but shining in glory. It was a terrifying sight. Just try to imagine it.

“The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow” (1:14). This isn’t the old age kind of white hair. It’s not a light gray or a gentle white. This is a bright and terrifying kind of white. It’s not a sign of weakness, but strength. “His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was

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like the sun shining in full strength” (1:14-16). Just imagine that picture. This is the same Jesus that John walked around Israel with. He went fishing with him. They were friends. Now his eyes are like a flame of fire, and his face shines with the full strength of the sun. How would you react to that?

Here’s how John reacted to it: he fell at his feet as though dead (1:17). This isn’t some voluntary posture of reverence, like if you meet some world leader. If you go to meet the President or the king of some great nation, there’s an etiquette to follow. You might bow or kneel out of respect, or you might use certain titles of respect. That’s not what John’s doing. This is a reaction, or even a reflex, to Jesus’ overwhelming glory. He fell at his feet as though dead. He’s paralyzed by the glory of Jesus.

John falls down in fear, because he is a sinful man, and he feels so out of place in the presence of such awful purity. You would too. It seems like Jesus should cast him away from his presence forever. It seems like John should wail like those who refused to repent.

But Jesus does not cast him away, just like he does not cast off any who seek his mercy. He says, **“Fear not”** (1:17). It’s a lot like the absolution Jesus pronounced to his disciples when he first appeared to them after his resurrection. There he said, **“Peace be with you”** (John 20:19, 21), because he had died to make peace with God. And he showed them the wounds in his hands and side to prove that he had made peace with God. Now he says to John, **“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”** (1:17-18). He states the reason John should not fear. It’s because Jesus died, and is alive forevermore. And because Jesus died and is alive forevermore, he has the keys of Death and Hades.

Keys are used to lock things, and keys are used to open things. The one with the keys has power to lock or open. Having the keys of Death and Hades means that Jesus has the power to lock someone in death, or he has the power to free someone from death. Jesus uses these keys to open death. That’s what his death and resurrection accomplishes. Sin had the power to hold us in death. But having paid for our sins, Jesus now has authority to bring us out of death. Jesus bore your sin in his body. And that sin was not able to hold him in death. Therefore, it also cannot hold you in death. When Jesus returns on that glorious day, he will open death. Death and Hades will give up their dead.

This is the glory of Jesus: that he died and is alive forevermore. He has been given authority over all things in heaven and on earth. He is the ruler of the kings on earth. But that is really a small thing compared to the rest of his authority. He even has authority over death. And he uses this authority for your good. He will not allow death to hold those who trust in him. For a time, it probably will, but only for a time. Jesus will return. Death and Hades will give up their dead. And Jesus will bring his believing saints into his eternal kingdom. Amen.

He who testifies to these things says, **“Surely I am coming soon.”** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen. (Rev. 22:20-21)