

April 28, 2019 – Revelation 1:4-18

Think of your favorite book in the Bible. The book that's the easiest to understand and provides the most hope and comfort to you. Do you have it? OK, now think of your least favorite. The one that's the hardest to understand. The least comforting. The least hopeful.

Now, that first book could have been anything. Genesis. Exodus. The Psalms. The Proverbs. One of the Gospels. One of Paul's Letters. There's any number of different possibilities.

But if you're like most Christians, there's probably a 50% chance that your least favorite book is the Book of Revelation. Because as much as it fascinates almost everyone, very few people enjoy reading it. And they certainly don't get any hope or comfort from it.

The Revelation is a tough book to get your head around. You can't simply take it at face value because there is no face value. Its face value is kinda... gibberish. Nonsensical. It has to be interpreted to make any sense at all.

And I could go into a long lecture about how most Lutherans interpret it and how other church bodies interpret it. And I could throw out big words like amillennialism and premillennialism and dispensationalism and “pre-Advent Divine Investigative Judgement” and so on to try to describe it. And it would all be just as much gibberish as the book itself.

So, instead, it's probably more helpful to take a look at some passages from the Revelation directly. Talk about them. Work through them together. And, it turns out, our weekly lessons after Easter do just that. For the next 6 weeks, in fact, our lectionary uses readings from the Book of Revelation as the Epistle lesson. So this is a good opportunity for us.

And, as you might expect, we start right at the beginning: Revelation chapter 1. And we find that this is the beginning of a letter. Of an epistle. Written by the apostle John to seven churches in Asia Minor. All of them clustered in an area we would now call the modern day nation of Turkey.

St. John tells these churches that he is a brother and partner in the tribulation and the patient endurance of those who are in Christ Jesus. Which is a fancy way of saying that he's undergone some intense suffering and persecution for the sake of Christ. And he is now on the island of Patmos.

Believe it or not, I've actually been to the island of Patmos. It's not a big island. Only about 13 sq mi. It's basically just a big rock sitting off the coast of Turkey.

And for John, it was a prison. You see, John had been arrested under the rule of the Roman Emperor Domitian. Who was cruel and ruthless and persecuted Christians mercilessly. According to Christian tradition, the emperor tried to have John executed multiple times, even going so far as to boil him in oil, but God rescued and protected him every time. And the emperor got so frustrated by his inability to kill John that he finally just exiled him to Patmos and told him to stay out of trouble.

And so, we read, that John is sitting on Patmos on the Lord's day: Sunday. And he is “in the Spirit,” it says. Which probably means he's at worship. As Christians at this time were already doing on Sundays. Reading God's Word. Singing hymns. Praying. Breaking bread and enjoying the Sacrament. The usual stuff that we still do on Sundays.

And while he's worshipping, he hears a loud voice like a trumpet behind him. Who tells him to write down everything he's about to see and send it to the seven churches of Asia. Now, keep in mind that John is on this island because he's in prison. He's been put here to persecute the church and keep him from being a pastor.

What do you think the Roman emperor is going to think about John sending these churches a letter telling them about the fall of Rome and the end of all earthly kingdoms? And so John does something that many Christians did during this time to get around the prying eyes of Roman authorities.

He writes in code. In fact, God tells him to write in code a little later, just after this passage. God tells him in verse 20 that these seven lights and seven lamp-stands are symbols for the seven churches he's supposed to write the letter to. God instructs him to disguise this letter under symbols like these.

But this code that John writes in isn't just any code. It's a code based on established Biblical images. Images that the Romans may not understand. But that his readers, with their knowledge of scripture, should be able to interpret.

And so he says that he sees one like a son of man. The Son of Man was Jesus' nickname for himself. And he's dressed in a robe with a gold sash and bright white hair and eyes like a flame of fire and a face like the sun shining at full strength. When Jesus was transfigured before the disciples – including St John himself – what did he look like? He was bright white, like lightning, and shined like the sun.

And from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword. Which sounds kinda weird. Until you read Isaiah, where he describes the Word of God he speaks as a sword coming from his mouth. An image that was so familiar to the early Christians that St Paul repeats it when he describes God's Word as sharper than any two-edged sword.

So, John sees a man, described by the same term that Jesus used to describe himself, looking the same way that Jesus did at the Transfiguration, and who speaks the Word of God so readily that you might even call him the Word made flesh.

In other words, John is telling us that he is seeing a vision of his Lord Jesus, in all his heavenly glory. Looking just like he did on that mountaintop years ago.

That's all this is. It's not so weird, after all. John, the disciple Jesus loved, is being given a revelation of Jesus. Which is really only a problem if Jesus is no longer alive. If he's dead.

But he's not dead. And John knows he's not. John of all people knows he's not. He saw the empty tomb. He was there when Jesus came to the disciples on Easter evening.

And yet, what was the last thing that John saw of Jesus? He watched him ascend into heaven. And then he was gone. And John knows in his heart that he rose from the dead. But what happened to him after that? What happened when he ascended into heaven? There had to have been doubts and questions and confusion.

And John is so overwhelmed by seeing his Lord once again, that he falls on his face, like he himself is dead. And Jesus walks over to him, just like in the old days, and lays his hand on John's shoulder with all the comfort of a best friend. And gives him these wonderful words:

*“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.”*

Fear not. Whatever sins you have committed. Whatever doubts you have felt. Whatever failures you have suffered. Whatever trials you have passed through. Fear not.

Because I was there. In whatever it was. And in whatever yet comes. I am the first and the last, in all things. I am always with you. I will never leave you.

I am the one who lives in a world of death. Because I died and yet live, I live forevermore. And now I hold the keys of death and hell. If I want someone locked in, they will be locked in. And if I want someone freed. They will be free indeed.

It's no wonder that John introduces this letter the way that he does after hearing that. *“Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come... from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.”*

The book of John's Revelation isn't just some obscure piece of symbolism and cryptic prophecies. It is the risen and glorified Jesus Christ coming to visit his best friend as he sits in prison. And give him the hope that he does not suffer in vain.

Give hope to an aging disciple who just wants to know if it was all worth it. That the resurrection was more than a dream that happened years ago. It is a present reality. And all that John has suffered is part of a great battle between the forces of heaven and the forces of hell, in which Jesus has risen victorious over all.

In those dark days of exile, Jesus wants John to know that though he ascended into heaven, he is still watching over his friends and disciples. He is still giving John hope and comfort. He is still giving us hope and comfort.

So many look at the Revelation and they see only strange symbols and disturbing images. They see only confusion and chaos. But if you look just under the surface, you something far more powerful.

You Jesus Christ risen from the dead. Coming to us in his Word to put his hand on our shoulder. And reassure us that he is still in control. That the one who died lives forevermore.

And that though we die, we will live forevermore. For he is only the firstborn of the dead. We are the secondborn. We are the ones freed from Death and Hades because he holds the keys. Because we have been forgiven by his blood. And made a kingdom. Priests to his God and Father. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!