

Last Sunday of End Time; Christ the King; November 26, 2023  
Revelation 1:4-18  
"See Jesus as he is"

**John,**

**To the seven churches in the province of Asia:**

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

**To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his own blood and made us a kingdom of priests to God his Father – to him be the glory and the power forever. Amen.**

**Look, he is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see him,  
including those who pierced him.  
And all the nations of the earth will mourn because him.  
Yes. Amen.**

**"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, the one who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty.**

**I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingship and patient endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus.**

**I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard a loud voice from behind me, like a trumpet, saying, "Write what you see on a scroll and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."**

**I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me. When I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like a son of man. He was clothed with a robe that reached to his feet, and around his chest he wore a gold sash. His head and his hair were white, like white wool or like snow. His eyes were like blazing flames. His feet were polished bronze being refined in a furnace. His voice was like the roar of many waters. He held seven stars in his right hand. A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth. His face was shining as the sun shines in all its brightness.**

**When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man. He placed his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid. I am the First and the Last – the Living One. I was dead and see, I am alive forever and ever! I also hold the keys of death and hell."**

It was the little boy's first time going out to trick-or-treat. His dad was going to lead him, and he dressed up, too. This was hard for the boy. He had never seen his loving father in any way but face-to-face, and now his father wore a mask. His father spoke to him to reassure him, and reminded him it was all a game and all for fun. Even still, throughout their night of trick-or-treating the boy occasionally asked his father to pull his mask down, so he could see his face as it was.

Lutherans often speak about the masks of God, and use the term in several different ways. One way is this: when God appears to his people today, he masks himself. He masks himself behind the pages of a book, water, bread and wine. He comes to us with his love and grace, but without showing his face, his full glory. He does this because he loves us; his full glory would vaporize our sinful selves. At the beginning of his Revelation, John saw Jesus' glory – more fully, but still not fully revealed – and here's what happened: **When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man.** The glory of Jesus that St. John saw knocked him flat.

John was **in the Spirit on the Lord's Day** when he saw Jesus as he really is: alive, glorious, and reigning. On this Lord's Day, the Holy Spirit speaks to us through these words, too. God will still wear his mask – we will not see this scene with our eyes. But through the Spirit, we will see Jesus for who he really is: alive, glorious, and reigning – even over death and hell.

That is what Jesus says at the end of these verses: **I was dead and see, I am alive forever and ever! I also hold the keys of death and hell.**" After Jesus died because, in John's words, he **loves us and freed us from our sins by his own blood** he showed himself to many people before he returned to heaven. Jesus' resurrection is so massively important that he spent forty days from Easter Sunday through his ascension making sure the disciples knew beyond any doubt that he had risen from the dead. Jesus' resurrection was God's stamp of approval on everything that Jesus had done. We know that he did free us from our sins by his own blood because Jesus was raised from the dead. In the love of Jesus' salvation, in the power of his resurrection, those disciples went out into the world after Jesus' ascension preaching the message of freedom from sin, power over death.

People still need to see Jesus as he now is – alive, glorious, reigning. In my office hang two beautiful crosses. One is a crucifix, with Christ on it, because we need to remember and trust in his death on the cross to free us from our sin and the punishment of hell. The other is a simple cross, with Jesus gone. Because we also need to remember Jesus did not stay on that cross. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus placed him in a brand new tomb, and when the ladies came to care for his body on Sunday, all they found was neatly folded clothes and an angel telling them that the crucified man who died on Good Friday was now the resurrected, triumphant Savior. Not only had Jesus conquered sin and Satan with his death on the cross, but now he had conquered death itself, glorious, alive, and ruling over it forever.

This is a truth Jesus continued to teach them. He appeared to his apostles at various times during the New Testament to remind them, encourage them, and guide them. This was critical in that difficult period after Jesus' ascension into heaven and before the entire New Testament was completed.

The book of Revelation is the final book of that inspired Word of God. One more time Jesus shows himself to his apostle John in person, the Savior who died alive again, glorious and reigning, even over death and hell. Jesus pulled down his mask to remind John one more time who he really is. And though we see it behind God's mask of the Word, we see it too, our Savior as he is: alive, glorious, and reigning.

As John recorded these words, he was very likely the last of the apostles alive in this world. He was an old man who had spent his entire life devoted to preaching the good news about Jesus. And when he wrote down these amazing visions, he informed us that he was now paying the price for that work. As far as we know, he was not executed for his work like every other apostle. But he was exiled on an ugly little island called Patmos, just west of today's Turkey. John says that he **was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus.**

John was in a bad place, alone and paying dearly for proclaiming Christ crucified and risen. And he wasn't the only one paying a price. Still in her infancy, the Christian church was in rough shape. From problems internal and external, Christians throughout the world were going through hardships. Persecutions and false doctrines threatened people's physical and eternal lives. If you read through these seven individual letters in the next couple chapters, sent to the seven churches, you get a sense of just what Christians were going through. John himself had lived through the news of his fellow apostles executed for the gospel they proclaimed. There were likely many times that this didn't feel like the eternally-victorious triumph that Jesus was supposed to be giving them. And now, as John sat in exile, Easter joy and confidence were probably in short supply.

Was Jesus really victorious? Was he really all-powerful, powerful enough even to beat death? Or did everyone get duped? From these opening words to the end, the book of Revelation is Jesus bringing comfort not only to John but also to all of the churches – the seven in Asia Minor at that time all the way down to every Christian church of today, including Trinity Lutheran. Because here, in the very first chapter, Jesus pulls down his mask and lets us see him, again, as he is.

In his vision, John hears Jesus speak, and he turns to look at him, and this is what he sees: **When I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like a son of man. He was clothed with a robe that reached to his feet, and around his chest he wore a gold sash. His head and his hair were white, like white wool or like snow. His eyes were like blazing flames. His feet were like polished bronze being refined in a furnace. His voice was like the roar of many waters. He held seven stars in his right hand. A sharp two-edged sword was coming out of his mouth. His face was shining as the sun shines in all its brightness.** I wonder, as I read these words, did John even recognize Jesus by appearance alone? Did he look anything like the teacher who walked with him from town to town, or knelt down to wash John's feet, the man John personally saw, as the only disciple brave enough to be on Calvary, beaten to pulp and dying on the cross? John was there to see Jesus' glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, but what he describes here seems to go far beyond the change in appearance the Gospels describe on that hilltop about seventy years before.

We won't spend a ton of time this morning going through Revelation interpretation, but to secure the central point of this sermon, we should note this much: the seven lampstands are symbols of the seven churches to which John was writing. So when Jesus is **among the lampstands**, that is a way of showing that Jesus is at that very moment with his people. Jesus wasn't far away in some remote part of the universe. He had not ascended and then forgotten about the people he left on earth. Despite what it may have felt like at times, Jesus was still there among his people, with them in all of their persecutions from the outside, false teachings and division on the inside. He was supporting them, not by making life easy, but strengthening his people to carry those crosses.

And what a vision of his power to do just that! John began this section by giving us this brief quote and description of Jesus: **"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, the one who is, and who was, and who is coming, the Almighty.** Jesus is the beginning and end of everything, especially your salvation. No one else could have even started your salvation, because no one else could even start a holy life for you. Ever since the Fall, all humans come to life as sinners and fall short of the glory of God. But Jesus made the perfect start by taking on our human flesh as God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Here, too, John calls Jesus "the Lord God." So he started his saving work in perfection, and carried it all the way through to his death on the cross and Easter resurrection.

And Jesus certainly looks the part of the Alpha and the Omega, the Lord God, risen, glorious, and reigning, doesn't he? How difficult it must have been for John to record it, impossible without the Spirit carrying him along as he did. Imagine the trembling hands of a nearly hundred-year-old man trying to get it down. The gleaming white, flames, and glowing hot metal all display the brightness and power of our Savior. He looks nothing like Jesus did during his earthly ministry, during that time of humiliation. No, he looks every part the Almighty God that he always was, humbled no longer.

**When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man.** Even behind the mask of the written Word, if you close your eyes and imagine it, it's an overwhelming scene. We see this over and over again in Scripture: someone is given even the slightest glimpse of God's glory, or even the glory of one of his messengers, the angels, and they fall down, terrified. Sinners can't be the presence of perfection, and more to that, sinners can't be in the presence of the holy God. And so John might have figured here that his long life was now over.

But now we see the frightening-looking, glorious Jesus speak and act very much like the Jesus we know from the Gospels: **He placed his right hand on me and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last—the Living One. I was dead and, see, I am alive forever and ever! I also hold the keys of death and hell."** You can hear Jesus using the same tone that he did with Mary Magdalene outside the tomb when she was so distraught that someone had stolen his body that she mistook the resurrected Jesus for the gardener...until he said her name. Or as he spoke Thomas, calmly and lovingly erasing his doubts. Or as he spoke to Peter as they sat on the shore eating fish.

But whether it's Mary, Thomas, Peter, or John here in Revelation, Jesus' patient, kind, loving goal is the same: he wants people to see who he really is. He isn't a weak pitiful man suffering and dying. He did that once, humbled to lowest possible point, to free us from our sin with this blood. This is who he is now and forever: alive, glorious, and reigning over death and hell. And yet, for those who love him, his glory and power are not a fright. For us he is not an angry, vengeful God that John might have mistaken him for. For his enemies, he is. But not for those who love him. And he is the Lord God who loves you, who died for you and lives again for you.

How often do you feel like Thomas, plagued with doubts about God's ability to follow through on the promises he's made? Is he really going to work good from hardship and difficulty? Is he really not going to give us more than we can bear together with him, really going to give us all we need to live, really going to provide a way to escape or overcome every temptation?

How often do Jesus' people today feel like John and those other first-century Christians could have felt, that Jesus had left them all alone? How often do the physical trials of this world lead us to lose track of the eternal blessings to come?

Whenever we feel like Thomas, Mary, or John and the other first-century Christians, we need to see Jesus as he is here, unmasked, Jesus here in all of his power, all of his victory, but also in all of his love and care for you. He is the one who **holds the keys to death and hell** because his death and resurrection have completely defeated both. You are free from their clutches because Jesus won the day for you. He is not for you an angry God, or an absent God, or a powerless God. He is the God who has set you free for eternity. He's the God that loves you with an eternal love. He is the God whom you and I are privileged and honored to serve. He is the God who walks among the lampstands of his churches, from Thyatira in Asia Minor in 100AD to Trinity in Woodbridge in 2023AD.

Jesus never, ever promised an easy road for those who trust in him. In fact, just the opposite. He promised a life where we will have to bear crosses and suffer for our faith. But, my brothers and sisters, through all of it, don't lose sight of him as he is. Though our hearts may waver, Jesus is ever present, ever loving, ever caring, alive, glorious, and reigning over our enemies. Amen.