

Easter is just the beginning. When I said that at the end of the service last Sunday, it came as something of an afterthought, as part of an appeal for those who haven't long been to church to come back again this Sunday. But it wasn't a throwaway line. It really is true—Easter Sunday *is* just the beginning. This is seen in the fact that during the weeks after Easter we typically read stories of the disciples' encounters with the risen Jesus—the story of the skeptical Thomas, which I just read, the story of the Road to Emmaus, the story of Jesus' breakfast with Peter and others at the Sea of Galilee. Through these post-resurrection appearances, the reality of Easter unfolds, gets played out. Easter Sunday then is just one day in the *season* of Easter when we ponder and marvel at the miracle of Jesus' resurrection.

But Easter is just the beginning in another sense, too. As I shared last week, the significance of Easter isn't just that Jesus isn't dead anymore, even less that now we “go to heaven” when we die. The significance of Easter is that God has acted, achieving a decisive victory over his enemies, and thereby reclaiming his good creation—us included—from all those forces that have enslaved and oppressed humankind for eons. We hear rumors of this truth, get glimpses of it, in the readings from the Gospels and the epistle lessons appointed for Eastertide. But the place where you see this reality expressed in its fullest, most vivid sense is in the book of Revelation.

Now, Revelation is not a book that most people, even most Christians, have much familiarity with. And to anyone who does know something about it, Revelation is a difficult book to love. The story is hard to follow. Its numbers and symbols are famously hard to decipher. Its images are sometimes abhorrent, and its picture of God at times unsettling. What's worse, the book has a deserved reputation for being the happy hunting ground for fringe fanatics and their pet theories about contemporary politics and precise timetables concerning the end of the world. Little wonder then that most traditionally minded Catholics and respectable mainline Protestants such as ourselves have tended to shy away from Revelation. In this, we follow the judgments rendered by our Protestant forefathers. Luther, you see, dismissed Revelation as a book which held little value for Christian faith and life. John Calvin, for his part, maintained a discreet silence about Revelation, writing a commentary on *every* book of the New Testament *except* this one. Today, Revelation remains a suspect book in many quarters and, perhaps as a result, is hardly ever read in worship. But it just so happens that the church has given us the next six Sundays to explore the book giving us a chance to read some of the highlights, and reflect on their meaning.

Now, I know this is something you've just been waiting for, excited about! For years you've just been dying for someone to deep dive the book of Revelation for you, maybe give you a series of expository sermons on the topic. If that's true for you, boy, you're in luck! Seriously, though, Revelation *is* a fascinating book, as I intend to show you.

Now, we have to acknowledge at the start the fact that there is a lot of confusion about this book. And part of it has to do with what to call it. Formally the English name given to the last book of the Bible is “the Revelation to John” or simply “Revelation” (*not Revelations*, plural).

Revelation comes from the Latin translation of the book's Greek name *apokalypsis*, "Apocalypse." Originally a fairly obscure term, the word "apocalypse," and "apocalyptic" and "post-apocalyptic," have become much more popular in recent years. Journalists and academics and even popular culture use these words to refer to cataclysmic events of historic proportions. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, for instance, the next day the headline of one British tabloid read "APOCALYPSE" in all capitals. The word seemed appropriate as it evoked the horror, the excess, the sense of an old order coming to an end and a new, more terrible one being born. And the "Apocalypse" of John might seem to fit this billing. In it, human history reaches an end of a sort, people are awakened out of their complacency, the world shaken to its very foundations, and science-fiction-like images are employed to convey events that exceed human capacities of expression, events like the sun darkening and the moon turning to blood.

The thing is, though, "apocalypse" does not mean a cataclysmic destruction. As its Latin translation suggests, "apocalypse" means a "revealing," a "disclosure," an "unveiling." It's not so much about the end times as it is about the here and now. What we see in the Apocalypse is a 'pulling back of the curtain' that separates our world from the heavenly world. It shows us a glimpse of what is going on right now beneath the surface, behind the scenes as it were, exposing the *supernatural* reality that governs and undergirds the natural or worldly reality.

The British journalist and social critic G. K. Chesterton once suggested that there are two kinds of people in the world: One group that thinks that, when trees are waving wildly in the wind, it is the wind that moves the trees; the other that thinks it is the motion of the trees that creates the wind. What Chesterton was talking about had nothing to do with meteorology, but with the belief in the reality of the spiritual world. The general consensus, he observed, used to be that the invisible world, the world of the spirit, the realm of God, is what really matters, that that is what gives rise to the visible world, and what is ultimately leading it to its destiny. Today, however, many people assume that what they see and hear and touch is what's "really real," and the sensible reality gives rise to what cannot be verified with the senses. They think that the visible accounts for the invisible. Chesterton considered this a peculiarly modern heresy.

Revelation shows how mistaken this belief is. No matter how much we "trees" flap our branches and try to control the wind, the wind has a mind of its own. In the book of Revelation, the author, John of Patmos, shows us that, while the powerful and the wealthy and the overachieving think that they are directing history, really it's God who is in control. He is the real "mover and shaker." God has been acting in the world from the beginning, since God created it, working within the sin-darkened world to bring about his purposes, to bring good out of evil. These actions culminated in the coming of Jesus. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God has acted critically, decisively, and finally for Israel, for all people, indeed the entire cosmos. If you want to know the point of history, if you want to know where we are all headed, if you want to know how it all works out in the end, look at Jesus. Revelation, more than perhaps any other book in the Bible, shows us this: that in Jesus God is at work bringing history to its conclusion and ultimate fulfillment.

Revelation does not make this point by coming out and saying it directly, however. Rather to make its point, it uses symbols, images, including word-pictures like the ones we see in today's reading.

Here, in the introduction to the book, John ascribes several titles to God that convey God's being in control. Firstly, John calls God the "One who was and who is and who is to come." That is to say, God cannot be confined to history. He is the Eternal One. God transcends time and history. He is, as John tells us a little later, "the Alpha and the Omega," A to Z we might say, the beginning and the end, the originator and the one who brings everything to completion. He is the Lord of creation and of history, the Master of space and time, in a word, the Almighty, the "ruler of all."

Now, the concept of an all-powerful supreme deity above the world, outside of time can be found in many religious traditions, but the Bible declares that this all-powerful Lord of history has acted *in history* for our benefit. God not only has power over time but has acted in time, in our world, in the calling of Israel, in the words spoken through the prophets, and above all in becoming human in Jesus.

Jesus then is the fulcrum, the linchpin, the watershed event in God's plan of redemption, giving us, John says, "faithful witness" to God's purposes and will. So, if you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. Moreover, John says, Jesus is the "firstborn from the dead," the progenitor, the harbinger, the vanguard of a new people. The idea is, Jesus was the first but he wasn't the last. God is creating a new people who share with Jesus in his death and resurrection, and thus in eternal life. Lastly, John says Jesus is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." This sounds a lot like what John said of God, being "almighty." Except that something even more daring is being said here. You see, of all the titles, this one is the most subversive, the most revolutionary. In the context in which John wrote, the ruler of the kings of the earth was Caesar, the emperor to whom each inhabitant of the Empire owed not only obedience but also loyalty. When John describes Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth, he is expressly challenging the ideology of the Roman Empire, saying that Jesus is the king of kings, to whom even Caesar must bow.

Wait a minute! That's great and all, but aren't we getting a little ahead of ourselves? I mean, Jesus has just got up out of the tomb last week but now he is the king of kings...? What we see here is in fact a glimpse of the fuller significance of the resurrection: Christ now risen has ascended to his throne in heaven and will return to rule over the earth. "Look," John announces, "He is coming again, coming with the clouds."

The apostle Paul has much the same understanding when he writes that after Jesus humbled himself unto death, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord." So, it's not just that Jesus was raised on Easter, restored to the life he had when he was walking around with his disciples in Galilee. No, he was raised, in order that he would take his rightful place beside his Father in heaven, to rule over all.

John's vision of Jesus here reminds us to not let our view of the world be dominated by the events we can see on TV or read in the paper—wars and politics and economic tumult. Rather, we are to keep looking, keep waiting for Jesus. Don't live your life looking down. For life is not

finally determined by what happens down here. It is ruled by the one who will come with the clouds.

There's more that can be said of the vision of Jesus in Revelation, and more *will* be said over the next few weeks. But the point I hope you take away with you today is this: Easter is just the beginning. Jesus' resurrection isn't just about Jesus coming alive again; the resurrection is a sign of God's power and purpose to restore all of his creation to its full stature and integrity. It is a pledge of God's ultimate victory over the forces that afflict and corrupt his creation. It shows that God, not any king or president or political movement, is in charge of the course of human history.

This is what John's Revelation reveals to us: a fuller picture of the resurrection and its implications. This is why the church has appointed this wild and wonderful book to read through the season of Easter. So let us devote ourselves in the coming weeks to delving into John's Revelation, that we might come to see this bigger picture, the larger plan God inaugurated on Easter, and marvel at God's wisdom and power and goodness. Thanks be to God!