

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

A Celebration of Life - October 31, 2021

Revelation 7:9-17

This morning, we have remembered the lives of six of our members who have entered the Church Triumphant this past year. Did you know that the words “Church Triumphant” is the term we use when we have a funeral service? I know those are words we don’t hear or say much. When people die, we normally use euphemisms like “He’s passed away,” or “She’s with Jesus now,” or “They’re in heaven.” We don’t say, “He’s entered the Church Triumphant.” If you said that about deceased friend or family member to almost anyone, the reaction would probably be, “Huh, what are you talking about?”

I mean really, “Church Triumphant” what could that possibly mean? The word “Church” we know. This is a church, a particular congregation. But “Triumphant”? What’s that about? When we hear the word Triumph or Triumphant, we think of winning. We think of some kind of victory, don’t we? Why or how can we connect the idea of death with the idea of victory? How can death be seen as something at which we are winners?

Death, to our minds, is all about loss. Death obviously means the loss of a human life. A human being has stopped living. Their body no longer functions. The loss extends to more than just the loss of an individual. Just about all of us are in relationships of all kinds. When people die, their death has an impact, usually a negative impact, on not just themselves, but on many people. Wives, husbands, children, friends, co-workers, even the larger community. All are affected by the death of a human being, almost always for the worse. How then, how, can we speak of death as a triumph?

Perhaps we can understand how death can be understood in terms of triumph as we recall today’s scripture from the book of Revelation. In our passage today, the author has a vision of a huge and moving celebration. Recall what the writer saw: “There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

What is going on here? What is the writer, traditionally seen as the Apostle John, seeing?

John is seeing of vision of faithful Christians united with each other and united with God. When John wrote the book of Revelation — which we must always remember was his recording of a vision or dream God sent him — John was writing to a Church that was being severely tested. Some 50 or 60 years after Jesus concluded his earthly ministry, Christ’s church was under severe persecution in many parts of the Roman Empire. Here was the problem: Jesus’ message of love, inclusivity, and mutual acceptance was proving to be a major threat to the stability of the Roman Empire. How? How could love be a threat? Isn’t love a good thing?

No, love and respect and tolerance, and accepting others who are different are definitely not welcome in a Roman Empire based on power and oppression. How did the Roman Empire work? Of course, it was a top-down world. The Emperor was on top. He commanded his governors. They commanded armies. The armies enforced the laws and supported the tax collectors who gathered the money to pay for everything.

The hierarchical system of Roman was reflected in every aspect of human life. Across the board, somebody had to be over somebody else. Men were superior to women and children. Masters were superior to slaves. The rich could do whatever they pleased while the poor were forced to pay and work and die.

The Roman system depended on fear, terror, and power.

Christianity did and still does, root itself in love, acceptance, and equality. Jesus' message, in short, is the mirror opposite of the Roman Empire. Is it any wonder that the earliest and most fervent believers in Christ were women, slaves, and the poor? Christianity promised two things: one, on earth, God stood for equality and love. Two, after death, all human beings were equal in the sight of God. No matter what your life was like on earth, God treated everyone the same.

When John writes of the "great multitude that no one could count," he makes no distinction among people. He writes that people from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages were worshipping God. All people are welcome. All people are accepted. All people belong to God, no matter what their background!

Surely this is good news! Surely this is the real triumph! Surely for people oppressed and ground into the dirt by the power of the Roman Empire the message of Jesus stood for a completely different way of looking and life and living.

And that, friends, is why we are here today.

First and foremost, let me say that Christians are no different from other human beings. The pain of death is very real. We all have experienced the deaths of loved ones: friends and relatives alike. We have all experienced loss and different times in our lives. We all have experienced the profound sorrow, anger, confusion, and loss that comes with the deaths of those whom we love. Regardless of our faith, death is real and death is painful. Remember that Jesus himself wept at the deaths of his own friends. Certainly Jesus' tears reinforce for us the reality and pain of death and loss and no-one should feel shame or embarrassment at weeping at the deaths of those dearest to us. We do weep, we should feel pain, not just in this year of remembrance, but every time we remember and relive the feelings we experienced when our loved ones have died.

Death is real. Loss is real. Pain is real. However, in our Christian faith, we have the assurance of knowing that while death is real, death is not the final answer. Loss is real, but loss is not the final answer. Pain is real, but pain is not the final answer. In Jesus Christ, we are confident — we are triumphant — in our belief that the end of our physical bodies is not the end of our lives. Our life continues with Jesus forever and that is what John shares in his vision for us in Revelation.

That is why this Remembrance Sunday, this All Saints Day, can and should rightly be described as a day of celebration. Yes, celebration, not sorrow! When we believe, when we know, that Jesus not only lived, but lives even now, we ourselves can have the assurance and the faith that we too, who are alive now, continue to live on after the end of our physical bodies. The God who created the earth, the God who created you, the God who created me. That God is the same God who has been walking with us from the moment of our creation and is walking with us right now. That God is the same God who never, ever stops walking with us

whether we know it or not. Our God is present with us now and will always, always, always, be present with us on this earth and after this earth.

Hence, friends, a celebration is indeed in order! How can we not celebrate when we know that God embraces all human beings all the time? How can we not celebrate when we know that God loves all of us from all over the world? How can we not celebrate when God knows the ordeals all of us have experienced and are experiencing right now?

You see, the message of Revelation is often interpreted only half way. What do I mean by half way?

So many people, friends, look at the book of Revelation as a prophecy about the future. They read the pages and think, "Ah, this is what is going to happen when the world comes to an end." We also know that plenty of so-called prophets have mis-interpreted the book of Revelation and applied it to the situation of the world at the time and have made ridiculous claims. Throughout history, false prophets and teachers have tried to fit current events into the descriptions in Revelation and throughout history, they have always managed to persuade people into believing their ideas.

But also, throughout history, not one of these false prophets has been correct. Here we are, and the world still is spinning.

Nonetheless, the Revelation of John is not just about a vision of the future. It is not just an assurance of how God remains with us and guides us all through our lives and after we leave this earth in triumph. We only half-read the book of Revelation if and when we forget that its message is equally applicable for us right now. Yes, Revelation is for us right now.

I have no doubt that every one of us has experienced, is experiencing, and certainly will experience major sorrows and setbacks in our lives. I know that some of us listening now are suffering in all kinds of ways. Some of us are suffering physically. Perhaps we have an illness which may or may not be treatable. Perhaps we are in a horrible relationship where we feel oppressed but also locked into so we cannot escape. Perhaps our jobs demean us and fail to utilize our talents and abilities. Perhaps we are frustrated at the world and the nonsense that we hear coming out of the mouths of so many so-called leaders.

Hear the good news! The promises of Revelation are not just for the future, this vision is for us right here and right now.

Experiencing ordeals is part of life. We all have difficult times which we cannot always see the end of. However, as followers of Jesus Christ, we know that we are not alone. Jesus experienced endless ordeals. Sometimes we think of Jesus' crucifixion as the only ordeal he went through. Certainly Jesus' crucifixion was the last ordeal he experienced. But when you think about it, Jesus experienced ordeals just about every day of his ministry. Recall the Jesus had not possessions. He had no home. He had nowhere to sleep. Jesus was constantly under attack by the religious establishment of his day. He was constantly arguing with people who were literally plotting his downfall and death.

Moreover, don't forget that Jesus surrounded himself with a frustrating array of disciples who seemingly could never understand Jesus' message of love, hope, and equality. Talk about ordeal! I imagine most of us have felt like the sighted person in the last of the blind once in a while. Poor Jesus was mixed up with people who simply could not or would not understand his message. Jesus' people often failed to realize that Jesus was calling them to a totally different way of look at life.

Jesus called them and calls us to look at life through the prism of love, acceptance, equality, and justice. He promises that when we follow his way, our lives will be better — not just when we die, but right here and right now!

Life should be an endless celebration. That is the point of the Book of Revelation. When Christ Jesus is part of our lives, we can celebrate life with gusto regardless of our present circumstances.

When life is good, celebrate! When life is uncertain, celebrate! When life is hitting us hard, yes, celebrate!

Jesus' triumph over death is indeed our triumph as well. His new life assures us that we will have new life. Our loved ones we remember today have new life. And generations yet to come will have new life when that life is rooted in Jesus.

Yet all of us in need of new life today, right now, have access to new life in Jesus today and right now. Resurrection power is not reserved only for the dead. Jesus' resurrection power also belongs to and can be accessed by us now.

The power of Jesus resurrection promises that new life is possible for us at any time. There is no question that some of us are suffering. There is no question that some of us are struggling. There is no question that there are times when we may feel like we'd be better off dead.

Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, it means that whenever we feel dead: mentally, spiritually, even physically, death does not have the final answer. Instead Jesus' resurrection promises that life can be renewed at any time.

Over and over again, the gospel tells us of human beings who encounter Jesus at the lowest points of their lives and are healed and rejuvenated. The gospel story is all about Jesus entering the world to change things — to shake things up — to make the seemingly impossible very much possible.

Needless to say that the resurrection life whether here on earth or with Jesus is going to be unquestionably different from what we have known. When we believe in Jesus transformative, healing power to change our lives, we cannot also forget that when we dare trust Jesus with the resurrection power to reshape our lives, Jesus' way and Jesus' truth for us will be different from what we expect.

But when we accept Jesus' way and Jesus' truth and Jesus' life, we will be resurrected right here and right now. Jesus can transform us day as surely as he embraced and transformed the friends and loved ones we have just honored. With Jesus, trust is real, love is real, transformation is real now and forever.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.