

## **“Living in Christ’s World: Who is Jesus?”**

*Reading: John 21:1-14; Revelation 1:9-20*

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Today we begin a series of sermons and lessons diving into the book of Revelation. It may not be immediately obvious why we would do that. Why would we look at Revelation immediately after Easter? Revelation is about future stuff, isn’t it? End times? Nations making war against God’s people, and monsters and dragons and all sorts of cryptic images that need decoding for them to be understood? Isn’t this book sort of like the advanced calculus class, something that only the really dedicated students need to bother with, but the rest of us can get along just fine without it? Isn’t it a very divisive book, where everyone has a different interpretation and no one can agree on anything and it just leads to arguments anyway? Why bother? Especially after Easter; why is Revelation relevant?

It’s my hope that we’ll address most of those questions as we go along in these weeks between Easter and Pentecost, but it’s true that the book of Revelation is not typically the first place we go in our worship after Easter. Several years ago Revelation was our focus during Advent, which is a much more natural fit, and is just about as different in tone as you can get from Eastertide. But this year we find ourselves in Revelation after Easter for one reason in particular: no other book in the Bible gives us as powerful of a picture of what is involved in living in Christ’s world. The whole New Testament deals with what life is like after Easter: the fact that Jesus has defeated death and is alive today means that our lives as His disciples have been totally transformed, and Paul and Luke and Peter and the other writers of the New Testament dive deep into what that post-resurrection life looks like. But Revelation shows us that life in a different light through different eyes. Rather than seeing the world after Easter from our earth-bound perspective, we are given a glimpse through the eyes of Christ to see the larger reality of how He has changed and is changing the world.

In this book, we are given a new perspective on what it means to live in Christ’s world, because the whole point of the book of Revelation is that Jesus is Lord of all of creation: it’s His, He has re-claimed it from the darkness, and He intends to bring it into His light. The reality of Christ’s world is revealed to us because our eyes cannot see it, and John the Revelator shows us visions of beauty and terror, shock and comfort. Though we like to pretend that we’re in control of our lives and we can chart our own courses through the world, the reality is that all too often we feel powerless in the face of incomprehensible forces. Governments and economic systems and huge corporations and the forces of nature, and maybe even mysterious demonic forces, all conspire to remind us of how small and fragile we really are. Sometimes we feel like we’re adrift in an inky void, living at the whim of arbitrary godlike powers. The message of Easter, that Jesus has defeated death and opened the way for us to be resurrected, gives us hope...but Jesus was raised from the dead a long time ago, and here we are, waiting. But Revelation lets us see how this world of godlike powers looks from Jesus’ standpoint, and when we see the world differently, we can then live in it differently.

That’s really the point of this bewildering book. We come to the end of the Bible and have read so many stories of God’s faithfulness, time after time after time, fulfilling promise after promise, overcoming enemy after enemy, and we’ve read the whole story of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and we’ve seen the growth of the church and heard teaching after teaching about how to live as people marked by the cross and empty tomb of the crucified and risen Christ.

Now John, the author of the book, is an old man, having lived his life devoted to the kingdom of Christ. He's an old pastor cut off from his congregations, in exile because of his faithful commitment to Jesus, and his churches are crying out to him, looking for instruction, because they're facing persecution. Jesus promised decades ago that He would return one day, but He's still not here, we're waiting, and things are uncertain.

The whole book will give us a grand revelation of a heavenly perspective on these events. We're going to see a lot more about how to live in a world where Christ is King. But the first thing we see is a revelation of Jesus Himself. When facing uncertainty or trouble, when asking hard questions of life during times of trial and pain, the first and most important thing our eyes can see is Jesus. It's worthwhile to spend time pursuing wisdom and logic and meaning and answers to those hard questions of life, but Jesus is Himself the greatest, first, and final answer. This is, as we read at the very beginning of the book, the revelation *of* Jesus, a vision of reality given to us by Jesus Himself. If you want a heavenly perspective, you first need to see the one around whom heaven revolves. It is Jesus Himself, His presence and His character, that gives perspective.

And the perspective we gain from the beginning is one of awe. We see a revelation of who Jesus is in a way we've never seen before. There was a moment during His earthly ministry when He took a few of His closest disciples up on a mountaintop and He was transfigured in front of them: He was radiant and dazzling as, for just a moment, His appearance became more heavenly than mortal eyes were used to seeing. But even that was only a glimpse. Here in Revelation, John is on the verge of seeing heaven opened, history laid bare, eternal mysteries uttered, and it all begins with the presence of Jesus. Nothing else that follows can make sense without this first appearance of Jesus. It is *His* revelation.

And so we see Jesus revealed in radiant glory. John is in exile, forced to live on a tiny island, maybe with only his Roman guards as companions. The stark reality of his treatment by the Roman Empire is immediately confronted by the overwhelming power and glory of the risen Christ. The first thing John notices is the loud voice of Jesus, making an announcement like the call of a trumpet. He turns to see this voice, and the picture is one of every manifestation of light. Jesus is surrounded by lampstands, He has stars in His hand, a glistening sword is coming from His mouth, His hair is as white as wool or snow, His eyes are like fire, His feet glow like burning metal, and He's dressed in gold. John falls to the ground as though he's dead: this Jesus is too mighty and too overwhelming to respond in any other way. John mentions that Jesus is "like a son of man," hearkening back hundreds of years to the writings of Daniel, who saw revelatory visions mediated to him by someone he described as "like a son of man." Immediately, we see that this Jesus is rooted in our ancient expectations and hopes, while we're also set up for anticipation that maybe this Son of Man will give us revelations like what Daniel saw.

Jesus speaks, and as always, His words are more revealing than His appearance. "Don't be afraid," He says as He places His hand on John in a sign of blessing and reassurance. Those familiar words of comfort that are so often said when God or one of His messengers come with a message for mortals. There's familiarity here — this is the same Jesus John walked with many years before, the same Jesus who invited him and the other disciples to a post-Easter breakfast on the beach — but like that post-Easter breakfast, Jesus is changed, only more so. Don't be afraid, John, but also be amazed at the power and authority radiating from the Jesus you thought you knew.

Don't be afraid, John, because the one standing in front of you now is far more mighty and powerful than any trouble you face. The Risen Jesus is far stronger than the strongest Roman army, and He has far more authority than the greatest Roman emperor. He is the First and Last, the one who is best described as Living, because He was dead and is now so alive that death can't ever touch Him again. He holds the keys to death and Hades; He's in charge and has authority even over them. Don't be afraid, because though the one standing in front of you is unimaginably powerful, He is *good*. He has answers for the mysteries that baffle you. And He begins with messages to the churches. He wants to speak to the people who follow Him and are feeling afraid and confused. And what's more, John sees Jesus walking among the lampstands that represent the churches, holding in His hand the angels of those churches: if you think Jesus has forgotten or abandoned His people, or that He's distant and removed from us, you're wrong, because He's right in the middle of His church. This Jesus is powerful, but He is good; He is transcendent and glorious like we can scarcely imagine, but He is present and walks among us.

We add this revelation of Jesus to the many others from elsewhere in our story. We add it to Isaiah 53, where the prophet foretells of a suffering servant of God who will be humble and humiliated because of His faithfulness, and the story of the crucifixion, where we see that prophecy fulfilled. We add it to the Christ child, an innocent and helpless baby born in lowly state who is none other than the incarnation of God, the King of the World. We add it to the ministry of Jesus, when He is revealed as a teacher and healer and proclaimer of the coming kingdom of God. We add it to Jesus, the friend of sinners, who was accused of being a drunkard and glutton because of the company He kept. We add it to the Jesus who confronts the injustices and hypocrisy of the world. We add it to the resurrected-yet-not-glorified Jesus who walks out of His tomb and is full of mystery and surprise, and we're not quite sure just *what* He is.

But the thing about an awe-inspiring revelation, as well as any other time we encounter Jesus, is what's maybe most important about the revelation is what it does to the person witnessing it. We read this vision of Jesus, and we pick it apart to see what it can tell us about Him, and we can indeed learn a lot. But John our narrator simply falls on his face as though he were dead. I think of the time Jesus and His disciples were crossing a lake in a boat and were caught by a sudden, violent squall, and at Jesus' simple rebuke the wind and waves died down. His disciples responded with, "Who is this, that the wind and waves obey Him?" That's a fair question when faced with such a person. But the unspoken question in their response is not only "Who is this?" but also "Who am I, that I'm in a boat with Him?" Who am I, to be in the presence of such a being as this, and what do I do now?

This revelation of the resurrected and glorified Jesus should prompt us to put ourselves in John's place, because we *are* in John's place: Jesus is the Living One, the Lord of Creation, and He confronts us with His power and majesty. So more than just asking, "Who is this Jesus?" we go on and ask, "Who am I?" This Jesus of John's revelation is the reality around which everything else revolves. You, me, the world, all of human history: He's not just one more part of it all, He's the Alpha and Omega, the All on which everything rests.

We live in a culture that tends to ask not, "Who is Jesus?" or "Who am I?" but rather "Who do you think *you* are?" It tells me that I'm the center of my world, so everyone else needs to prove to me that they're worth listening to or trusting. I'm the standard, the anchor, the alpha and omega for

myself, and everything else is measured against me. We so rarely stop and examine ourselves other than to compare ourselves with others: am I better-looking than so-and-so, or smarter, or whatever. But this revelation of Jesus after Easter gives us the opportunity to re-orient our lives on Him, to begin to gain a better view of how the world works, to ask myself who I am and who I am called to be in the presence of such a person as Christ.

This is the revelation of Jesus Christ: not only seeing Jesus, but seeing all other things in light of Jesus. He is not the revelation, He is the revealer. In the book of Revelation, it is Jesus who makes things clear, who reveals mysteries, who moves history forward. He has a message for the church: He reveals the truth about the church, and He calls the people of the church to repentance and faithfulness. So what about you? Do you want to see who you are in light of Christ? Do you want have your calling revealed by His presence?



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