**Hope Beyond History**

**Text: Revelation 7:9; 13-15**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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When I told someone that I would be preaching on Revelation this Sunday, they said, “You’re a brave man.” Not true! A brave man would’ve preached on Revelation a long time ago. I think this is the first Sunday *ever* that I’ve dared to do so.

First, a few house-keeping and myth-busting details. This last book in the Bible is often called “Revelations,” but the real title is *The Revelation to John*. This is not the apostle John, son of Zebedee, fishing partner of Peter, but a later Christian who has been arrested by the Romans and banished to the Isle of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea.

And it is *not* a description of how the world will come to an end in the 21st century. Any more than it describes how the world will end in the 20th century, or the 19th century, or any other century in which misguided prophets have lifted-up this book and told the world that the end is near. It is rather a word of hope to Christians in the late1st century; Christians who are dying violent deaths at the hands of the Roman government. It’s a word of encouragement that their cause is righteous and that God’s victory is assured.

Not that this encouraging word is easily understood. It is offered in symbols and metaphors that are very foreign to our 21st century minds. They might have been less foreign to the people who first heard them nearly 2,000 years ago. Imagine a group of archeologists in the year 4019 discovering a diary written today. As they read through the diary, they find these words: “As we drove down the highway, around noon, we looked for the golden arches.” Now the archeologists are wondering what “the golden arches” means. Is it some kind of temple? A famous geological feature? Of course, *we* know that these folks are looking for McDonald’s. The golden arches are a symbol whose meaning is well known in the 21st century, but it may be very obscure in the 41st century. 2,000 year old symbols are hard to decipher, and we’re inclined to read our own meanings into them, which explains why so many people have interpreted Revelation in so many ways. And, of course, I may be reading my own meaning into Revelation as well, so beware.

What is clear is that Revelation peers into the future and offers a vision of the end of time. It is a word of hope for the 1st century, but it locates that hope beyond the *final* century. It is what biblical scholars call *eschatology*. That is to say, it has to do with the *eschaton:* from the Greek word *eskhatos*, which means “at one end of a continuum.” It means the last, the most extreme, the end point on a line. The eschaton is the end of history. We don’t know when it’s going to come. Jesus didn’t even know when it was going to come (Mark 13:32). But when it does come, the dead will be raised, the righteous will be vindicated, the faithful from every age and place will be gathered together, and love and justice, gentleness and peace will reign forever.

That’s the victory, that’s the great reunion, depicted in today’s scripture lesson. The trumpet has sounded, the dead have been raised, and now a great multitude from *every* nation, from *all* tribes and peoples and languages, has gathered around the throne of God. And John’s message is this: Out of the turmoil and tragedy that have occurred *throughout* history will come God’s ultimate victory, in Jesus Christ, *beyond* history.

That’s the good news of this passage, and of the entire Revelation to John. Let’s break that good news down into four parts: Resurrection, comfort, washed in the blood, and who’s there.

First of all, we have the resurrection of the dead. These are the folks who are gathered around the throne. They’ve been raised with Jesus, and now they are praising Jesus, the Lamb of God. And the good news, of course, is that the dead *will* be raised. The good news is that death does not have the last word; that death has lost its sting.

This notion of the resurrection actually had its origins several centuries before Jesus. The apostles could make sense of the possibility that Jesus had been raised because resurrection was already a well-established Jewish doctrine. We see hints of it in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14). We see it developed further in some of the Jewish texts that were written in the years between the Old Testament and the New Testament. During those years the Jews were an independent nation for less than a century; from about 150 B.C. to 63 B.C. Before that they were colonized by the Greeks and after that by the Romans. During those centuries of foreign occupation, faithful and courageous Jews organized and fought against their foreign oppressors. And they were arrested and tortured and executed. Righteous believers, suffering at the hands of evil pagans. I mean, it shouldn’t be that way. How do you make sense of that? What about all of those promises in the Psalms that God will protect the faithful?

The Jews made sense of it this way: they posited the notion that the victory of justice and the vindication of the righteous would be realized beyond history. God would bestow new life upon those who had died in the struggle for justice by raising them from the dead. In other words, the victory denied in history would be realized – as a gift from God – beyond history. When the disciples saw the Risen Lord, they believed that they were seeing the first stage of the realization of this doctrine. And when righteous Jews and Christians continued to die at the hands of the Romans, the early Church found comfort in the notion that history would soon end, and all of these martyrs would soon be raised, and the Romans – and all forces of evil – would finally be defeated.

So, first of all, it was believed that the dead would be raised; and secondly, this hope brought comfort to those who continued to be persecuted; those who carried on the fight. In Revelation they were reminded of Paul’s words that the suffering of this present time is not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). For the death and destruction and distress and pain that we are now experiencing are, in fact, the labor pains of the new age that is even now being born. That was Paul’s word to the Church, that was John’s word to the Church, that continues to be the word of hope that the scriptures bring to Christians whenever they are being killed because they stand-up for justice, they stand-up for truth, they speak out against the lies and deceit and acts of tyranny that are being perpetrated in high places by those who have no respect for the laws and traditions of ethical monotheism.

The doctrine of resurrection brings comfort because it responds to that age-old question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” It doesn’t so much answer the question as it provides an antidote to the problem: the good, the righteous, the innocent will not *always* suffer. And even their present suffering will not be in vain. Because the blood of the martyrs waters the roots of God’s Kingdom. The suffering of the innocents can be used to achieve the redemptive purposes of God. And those innocents will be raised so that they can see and experience the ultimate victory of the Lord.

Which is really what it means to be “washed in the blood of the Lamb.” To be sure, it’s a grotesque and stomach-churning image. It’s an image that the Bible brings forth in response to the grotesque and stomach-churning violence that good folks have witnessed throughout history: whether we’re talking about the Roman Empire, or the Spanish Inquisition, or the murderous governments and gangs that have terrorized the people of Central America in recent decades. To speak of these martyrs in Revelation 7 as having been “washed in the blood of the Lamb” is to say that the blood of Christ is spilled not only on the Cross in A.D. 30 but *whenever* the innocent suffer. And it is to say that such suffering is redemptive: somehow, in the long term, through the long-suffering grace of God. I mean, I can sing “I’ve been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb” with as much gusto as anyone. But when I do so, I must remember that the shedding of his blood has to do not simply with my individual salvation but also, and especially, with the salvation of the whole world from injustice and suffering and violence and death. “Salvation belongs to our God,” sing the resurrected martyrs gathered together around the throne. And what they mean is that it is *God’s* salvation. Not my salvation, but God’s salvation, offered not just to you and me, but the whole world. It’s God’s salvation – God’s victory – over *all* manifestations of sin and evil and death; not just the isolated instances of sin about which I allow my self-righteous soul to get all tied-up in knots.

So the good news of Revelation is that the dead will be raised, bringing hope and comfort to all who suffer. Their rising will reveal that Christ’s suffering – in and through the suffering of the innocent and the righteous – Christ’s suffering is redemptive. But when the faithful are gathered around the Lamb, who’s there? Note again the words of Revelation 7:9. Who’s there? A great multitude, from *every* nation: from *all* tribes and *all* peoples and *all* languages. That puts the lie to the notion that we see in some traditions that those who will be gathered around the throne are somehow just a select few; and of course the person who puts forth such nonsense assumes that he or she will be among them. If only a select few were to be saved and raised, who among us – sinners that we all are – who among us could be so bold as to think that we had somehow earned a place among those saints. But it’s not a select few, it’s a multitude. And they are there not because they’ve earned a place, but because of God’s abundant grace. There’s a wideness to God’s mercy, as the old hymn says. The Bible names no nation or race or language that is somehow exceptional in its virtue. God so loved the *whole world* that he gave the only begotten Son (John 3:16). All nations stand under God’s judgment; all nations receive God’s grace; all nations and peoples and races can find their hope in God’s victory. *All* God’s children; *everywhere*. No matter how great the suffering may be in history, the Bible offers a hope and an assurance beyond history; a hope and an assurance that is good news for all: not because of any virtue that we have, but because of God’s amazing grace.

This hope has brought not only comfort but courage to those who have carried on the struggle for love and justice and truth. Like the folks who were gathered in a concert hall in Madrid in 1939. It was the dying days of the Spanish Civil War. Madrid was one of the few places in Spain still under the control of the Republican forces. But the capital had been besieged by Franco’s fascists for more than two years. On this afternoon of March 28, an orchestra and chorus were rehearsing Beethoven’s 9th symphony, to be performed that evening. They’d rehearsed all but the final movement. Then word came that Madrid had fallen to the fascists, and the new government had cancelled the evening’s concert. Everyone knew of the arrests and executions to come. No one knew when – if ever – they would be together and make music again. But the orchestra and chorus gathered around the conductor, and they performed the final movement of Beethoven’s 9th; the Ode to Joy: with a passion for life like they’d never put into it before.

The resurrection of the dead isn’t simply about faithful souls winging their way to heaven. It’s about *all* manifestations of the victory of life over death. It’s about making a joyful noise to the Lord in all times, under all circumstances, knowing that we will all be gathered together again, *some* day, singing of blessing and honor and glory and power unto him who sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb; singing on that great and glorious day when all will live together in peace, and unafraid. Amen.