

April 28, 2019

Revelation 1: 4-8

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“The Timeless Christ”

The beginning of The Book of Revelation identifies John as the author of the dramatic vision that makes up the bible’s final words. We know John’s vision comes to him while imprisoned on the Island of Patmos. This was a maximum security prison where the Roman Empire sent their most troublesome agitators. Today we focus on two important things about John which help us understand what he reveals to us. First, John is certain God is active in our lives and world. Secondly, John believes God’s presence is most real in the face of life’s most challenging circumstances. In both cases, John testifies that the living Christ makes this possible. Christ connects us to both God’s activity and God’s presence. Christ is the catalyst. On this first Sunday after Easter, the witness of John’s revelation reminds us that our celebration of Christ’s resurrection on Easter just one week ago is not tied to a single holiday or one morning worship service. Christ lives. The gospel says, Christ lives so we will live. John’s revelation helps us see what he sees so that we can experience how full and faithful our lives can be with Christ. As we move forward this morning with our reflection, we can acknowledge there is much we could focus on when it comes to The Book of Revelation. Quite frankly, it deserves whatever attention we give it but the time allotted to us today has a limit. For this reason, I suggest our focus be the two main aspects of John’s writing I’ve mentioned. Number one, God is active in our lives and world. Number two, when we face significant challenges God’s presence is always there. Again, Christ makes both of these realities possible. So, in Christ, let’s take each of these in turn.

Our lives are full of the activity of God. I realize we are here in the building of the church today but here’s the question, where did we experience God’s activity yesterday? How were we aware of God’s action this past week? I ask because sometimes we compartmentalize our experience with God. We think about God when we come to church. We turn our hearts toward God when we pray. When we open our bibles or read from scripture we are obviously more tuned into God but how do we sense God’s activity in the routine of life? In the passage we’ve read, John identifies the One who was, and who is, and who is to come. The risen Christ is this timeless One, not bound by the limitations of a 24 hour clock or a 365 day year. As we say in the classic language of the church, Christ is in all and through all. To be clear, life with Christ is not just our experience of Jesus on Sunday mornings or in this building. Where did you sense God’s activity through Christ yesterday? Where was Christ active in your mind and heart this past week? My yesterday was a busy one. I serve on the Board of Trustees of Otterbein University. The board met over this weekend and their undergraduate commencement is this morning. For obvious reasons, I’m not there for the graduation ceremony but yesterday I was able to participate in the ceremony for graduate students. Like all graduations, there was pomp and circumstance. Diplomas were conferred, a commencement address was given, and the event involved all of the things we expect from an institution of higher education. As I sat through the proceedings, I asked myself the question I’ve asked you. Where is God? What does a living Christ have to do with any of this? And then, I remembered the scripture passage that says, “Put on the mind of Christ.” I thought, what we are celebrating in this graduation is only possible because God so beautifully creates each one of us. Each of the graduate students were unique and gifted in ways that make them who they are. None of them called their own life into being. Christ was, and is, and is to come. Christ is in all and through all. It was so clear, when I allowed myself to ask the question, how God was involved. Our ability to think, and learn, and apply knowledge to better ourselves and our world, is given by God. Our minds, our accomplishments, our abilities, all of it is connected to Christ.

From his prison cell, John saw the world through eyes of faith. Rome had hold of everything. The power of the emperor called the shots. This is why John was arrested and thrown into prison. His witness was a threat to the conventional powers. In the strength of his faith, John saw beyond Rome’s grip. John knew God is not limited by the political realities of the world. John saw that those who abuse their power do not have the last word. Any system that serves a few and discounts the many does not ultimately shape the world’s destiny. John saw God at work in everything, and he opens our eyes to see this same truth in our lives. Is God active when we gather as the church? Of course. Is God active in the places where we work, and in our relationships with others, and in the routine experiences that make up our daily lives? John would say with just as much certainty, of course. The faith we have is a gift given by God. It’s about more than Sunday morning. Christ has been active in our lives and Christ is active now. Christ comes to us in every moment along the way. On this Sunday after Easter, we renew our commitment to look for the work of Christ in every aspect of life.

The second truth John reveals is that God is especially present in life’s greatest challenges. Let’s think, again, about what John, the prisoner, experienced. His situation was hopeless from a human point of view. He was probably chained to the floor or wall of his cell. We can imagine he was in solitary confinement and it was agonizingly cold and dark. John’s revelation makes clear that despite the intense hardship of his situation he was not

defeated. Christ is the one who loves us, he says. John says that he, and all of us, are free from every circumstance or sin that separates us from God. John, isolated in the lonely darkness of that prison says, we are created to be a kingdom, a people, a community serving God and God's purpose forever. When we are facing the most dire challenge, God is most real.

John does not want us to forget that the Christ who was, who is, and who is to come makes our hope possible. Christ came to John in the darkest place of his life shining an eternal light that gave John hope, even when agony and probable death were waiting for him. A pastor from one of the churches in the south that were recently set afire was interviewed by a reporter. He said no manner of violence or destruction could ever destroy the church. The building was gone, he said, but the church is as strong as ever. From the Island of Patmos, John experienced what the Apostle Paul taught the early Christians, "For we know that if this earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." (2 Cor. 5:1) The message of Easter isn't just a message for a solitary Sunday morning in early spring. Easter is power that makes it possible for John to see what he sees, and Easter opens our eyes of faith, too. As some have said when referring to the cross and the resurrection, with God the worst thing is never the final thing. On our worst day and in the midst of the worst experience, God's presence brings light and life.

John's revelation unveils the truth for us to see and Christ makes all of it possible. The question of where Christ was alive for us this past week is a good question to ask. Even more hopeful is our expectation this week that the One who was, and who is, is preparing to come to us in the days ahead. I want to be ready. Don't you?