



Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 22, 2022

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Acts 16:9-15](#)

[Psalm 67](#)

[Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5](#)

[John 14:23-29](#)

O Maker of all, who loves everything you have made, pour your love into our hearts so that we may learn to love you because you first loved us, and let it overflow so that we may see and love all things and all people because you are there, just as you are here and everywhere and above all things. Let your ways be known on this earth, your saving health among all the nations. Let all the people sing "Alleluias" of praise to you. Amen.

Good morning.

Christ our Lord is risen and is appearing among us and going before us.

We have had a busy, prayerful, joyful time this week here at St. Luke's. We celebrated and honored the life of our sister, Carla, as we laid her ashes to rest and gave her over to God's loving embrace. We enjoyed a wonderful steak dinner offered by our Men's Group last night. Earlier this week, our church leaders on the Vestry met. Folks prayed in midweek services, packed food, met with people out in our communities.

And it's a busy time of year. Many of us are busy in our gardens. I'll admit, I haven't done much with our gardens yet at home, because it has been so cold for so long this Spring, and because our household has been busy with lots of end-of-year school events like concerts and parades and productions. It's been a time for many of us of visiting children and grandchildren, taking trips to familiar and new places, starting new projects. People are abuzz with lots of activities.

This 50 days of Easter Season keeps bringing us back to the core themes of love, and peace, and openness to surprising possibilities. Love that overflows, and openness that stretches wide, and peace that overcomes anxiety. Love, and openness, and peace.

I love how the Book of Acts carries us along through a windstorm of movement of the Holy Spirit through the lands of the Roman Empire.

How many of you have had a dream, or vision, that was really vivid – that you found so compelling that you followed it? Some of you have shared stories with me about such dreams or visions that led you to take steps in new directions in your careers – that led you to move to new locations, even to here – that opened you to people and places and possibilities in new ways?

That's the kind of dream Paul has. He and his missionary travelers are moving from place to place, carrying the good news of Jesus. And in the verses before our passage today, we can read

that they tried to go to some cities and towns, but the Spirit prevented them – guided them away in a different direction. How many of us have experienced that, in some way? We were setting our plans for one path, and then we found ourselves backing away because it just didn't seem right?

Then Paul gets a clear direction in a dream – a vivid call from a man crying out, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” They went.

There seems to be a lot of “following your gut” in the Book of Acts. But it's not just the kind of “following your gut” that is trusting every single impulse you have. It is a “following your gut” by listening deeply for the guidance of the Holy Spirit – and by staying connected with and deeply open to God's presence – and by taking counsel together in a prayerful spirit.

I want to turn our attention to the book of Revelation. All through this Easter Season, we are hearing consistently from the Book of Acts and the Book of Revelation. So, Revelation – that book full of visions that came to the apostle John in his exile on an island. How many of you have read Revelation? I know, with Episcopalians, that may be a weird question. Some of you have been making your way through the Bible over these last few years, and that is wonderful. But let's face it, there are some weird parts in scripture, and the Book of Revelation is one of those. I grew up reading Revelation. My mom had taken a strong turn toward fundamentalism and was quite taken by thinking about the “End Times” and the return of Christ. So, I grew up learning about all the “End Times” predictions supposedly in the books of Revelation, and Daniel, and Ezekiel.

Revelation has been a popular book among Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians. But, it is oddly popular. Because, people are reading the book like a magic code book – with the excitement kind of like you may have had when you got your secret decoder ring in a cereal box. Because, people are reading the book like a secret guide to knowing the future.

But, there is a bigger problem than that, these days. People are confused about the role and place of the Church – the followers of Jesus – in times that feel like the “End Times.” In the Book of Revelation, the visions and symbolic pictures of events point to times of suffering, God's punishment of the forces of evil, and longsuffering perseverance of the saints. But today, there are people misreading Revelation and taking it as license for “Christian conquest.” People are telling themselves and others that it is not just the hosts of heaven and the forces of nature that will eventually bring God's justice, but that we good Christian folk are supposed to stand up and fight a battle of conquest. So, it is a misreading.

The Book of Revelation points to the suffering, not the victorious conquest, by the faithful. Final victory belongs to Christ, and to Christ alone. In the meantime, we live faithfully in love of Christ, as much as we can. This book was written during the time of the Emperor Domitian, who ordered the people of the Empire to address him as “Lord and God,” who set up statues and

images of himself to be worshiped. Christians refused to do this, and were executed, exiled, and had property seized. The book offers incredible hope to the faithful who have had to move more into hiding and who are living under fear of aggressive rulership – not that far from the aggressive strategies of “confrontational politics” that are surfacing now, driven by a “Might makes right” approach and a refusal of conversation and compromise. The book was written in code, if you will – but in code that was incredibly condemning of the cruelties and immoralities of the Roman Empire – hidden in plain sight so that Roman police would not recognize the book as a rallying cry.

The misreading of Revelation is nothing to toss aside lightly. It is mis-shaping minds and hearts, and mutating people toward seeing the world as perpetually against them, and now being used to muster people toward attitudes of conquest.

Christianity has had a history of flirting with and embracing conquest in the name of Jesus. In Spain, on our honeymoon, On our honeymoon years ago in southern Spain and Morocco, Heather and I saw a statue in a big baroque church that celebrated the re-conquest of Spain and the discovery of the New World. In both of these scenarios, conquering Spanish soldiers with crosses emblazoned on their armor were shown crushing foes and pointing spears. This is exactly the spirit that gave rise to the “Doctrine of Discovery.” Many of you have heard of the “Doctrine of Discovery” put forward by the Catholic Church of that age, permitting and even blessing the persecution and annihilation of native peoples by using the language of Divine Right that had been given to Christian nations to conquer other people. That language got picked up by American politicians in the 1800s in the language of “Manifest Destiny” as a way to sanction pressing ever westward and overtaking the lands of indigenous people. Today, we hear it coming from the Russian Orthodox Patriarch himself, about Russia being called on by God to cleanse the earth of Western heresies and excesses.

But the Book of Revelation is meant to provide hope and vision of Christ’s final victory – and to give a sense that the going is not easy in this world. It is meant to point us back toward Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith, who is the Lover of all Humankind and all Creation, who in the end will bring all to wholeness and holiness in the new life of resurrection.

The picture that emerges in a true reading of the Book of Revelation is of faithful followers of Jesus who suffer, and of God who brings final justice. So, followers of Jesus in the world of this time are suffering – and the world is won through long-suffering faithfulness, not through conquest of the faithful over others. Any conquest or victory comes through the hosts and forces of heaven. In the end, God will arise victorious over the wickedness and cruelty and deception that seeks to corrupt this world. In the meantime, we as followers of the Lamb are to live faithfully in the love of Christ, as much as we possibly can.

And today’s selection, from the ending chapters of Revelation, paint us the great promising picture of Christ’s joy-bringing victory in the birth of the new heaven and new earth. There is no

temple anymore – God himself is the temple, Christ Jesus the Lamb is the temple. Do you remember when Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, and they had this amazing conversation with each other? Jesus told her that the time was coming when people would no longer worship in the temple in Jerusalem, or on a holy mountain in Samaria, but “in spirit and in truth.” And all throughout John’s Gospel, Jesus replaces and supplants holy places with himself as he heals and teaches and transforms lives. Jesus replaces fixed things with the much more profound reality of God on-the-go, a God on the move. The holy place is wherever God is dwelling.

So, in the kingdom of God, there is no more temple, and no need of sun or moon, and no shut gates closing anyone in or out of the city. God replaces and displaces all fixed things that we attempt to create and impose – God becomes the place of all adoration, the source of all light, the portal of all welcoming and journeying. And in that place there is no unclean thing – for God has declared all things clean. There is full light, gates open wide, a river clean and bright like crystal, and trees of life filled with fruit for every street.

This is the promise that awaits us, in the victory of God over all things that distort and disrupt the good that God has created and is still creating. Do not be fooled – it is God’s work, the ultimate victory and the remaking of heaven and earth. Day by day, as we live faithfully in the hope of the promise, we will have strength not only to endure any trials but to serve the world in the light of Christ brightens all the world, brings wonder and healing to all places, and opens all gates.

Can we dare to live such a promise, as if it were true and happening even now? This is how our ancestors in faith dared to live. Peter takes the vision to heart, and journeys with people he would never otherwise join to a home he would never otherwise enter – and there he hears and sees the work of God that he otherwise would have completely missed. The new Jerusalem descended all around him, and he saw and stepped into the ever-expanding kingdom of the God who will not be bound. Imagine what might happen if we lived by following these nudges and invitations of the Holy Spirit. Imagine what we will discover – what love will be shared and peace will break forth as we open ourselves to the leading of the Holy One. Open your minds and hearts, friends, and follow the adventure. Each day, with each neighbor and stranger and situation. With or without us, the heaven and earth are being remade. Where is God beckoning you to follow, even where you might not want to go? What light will you discover there?