

Revelation 1:4-8
April 11, 2010

South Plains

The Difference Maker

The waiting room at the hospital can become a very intimate place. A colleague of mine found herself sitting alone in a crowded waiting room outside the Intensive Care Unit. As she waited to meet some parishioners, the noise level momentarily died and she overheard this scrap of conversation from a woman who was talking on her cell phone. The woman had just come from the nurse's station and was calling a friend. "Billy died," she said. "They had to shock his heart back.... I hope he's going to rise again."

Given the setting, I'm sure she meant, "I hope he's going to be on his feet, up and around again." But, instead she used the language of Easter, "I hope he's going to rise again." She was not wrong in her choice of words. Easter means not only that Jesus has arisen from the dead. It also means that you and I can rise again. It means that death does not have the last word for us. It means Jesus makes a difference for us.

That's how I read these opening words of the book of Revelation. Revelation is a letter sent from a prophet named John to seven churches in Asia. John wants to share the hope of the resurrected Christ with churches who need hope in their own resurrection. By the time this letter was written the first blush of Easter excitement had

begun to fade like our spring daffodils. Almost surely, all the original disciples who had walked the Galilean roads with Jesus were dead. Scholars date the letter that we call the book of "Revelation" about the year AD 96. By this time we know Christians had endured persecution by both the Jews and the Romans. Nero had blamed Christians for burning Rome. They were sometimes considered insurgents against the Empire, sometimes called atheists because they refused to worship Roman gods, and always they were thought by the Emperors to be unpatriotic because they would not call Caesar "Lord."

John writes this letter to be read in worship. The images and visions seem pretty obscure and outlandish to us, but the message was clear to first century Christians who were in danger: "Buck up," John says, "Things look bad now. But, our future with God in Christ is secure because of the victory of Christ's resurrection." The four titles that John uses for Jesus in this introduction describe a risen Lord, a difference maker. Most importantly they are titles that use the language of Easter just as that woman in the ICU waiting room was using the language of Easter to express her hope in a better future for Billy. John is saying, "I know that faithful Christians are going to rise again because the living Christ is incarnate in you." That's still a good word for us twenty centuries later.

The first title "Jesus Christ" is familiar to us. It's so familiar that some people think "Christ" is Jesus' last name. If they met him on the street they would probably

want to call him “Mr. Christ,” and would not think of calling him “Jesus” to his face. But, for John and these churches, Jesus was “the Christ,” a title that literally translates the Hebrew word “Messiah” as “the anointed one.” Jesus was anointed king, prophet and priest by his baptism in the River Jordan.

John is reminding those Asian Christians that Jesus was baptized just as they were baptized, and with the same result. They also are claimed by God, commissioned for service to God, possessed by the Holy Spirit. People who are possessed by the Holy Spirit can be a little bit crazy for God. They’ll take chances like helping a stranger, loving their enemies, giving away their possessions. In fact, the early Christians would get a reputation for abnormal helpfulness. They ministered to the sick during plagues and pandemics. They took in the homeless. They did the same sort of things Jesus did. In fact, it was this abnormal altruism that would eventually convince the authorities that Christians were good citizens to have around. Some folks still need convincing.

The second title may be less familiar to us, but the Asian Christians knew exactly what John meant when he calls Jesus the “faithful witness.” We talk about “witnesses” as people with first hand knowledge of an event. A witness may be called upon to testify under oath in a court of law. Just a few years after this letter was written, a Roman Governor named Pliny describes his treatment of Christians in a letter:

I asked them whether they were Christians. Those who responded affirmatively, I have asked a second and third time.... If they persisted in their confession, I had them executed. (Boring, *Revelation*, p. 14)

The word for witness in Revelation is *martus*, from which comes our word ‘martyr.’ Jesus died a martyr for his faithfulness to the gospel of the kingdom. He could have softened his attacks on the Pharisees. He could have used his eloquence to encourage the people to pay their temple tax. It would have been simple enough to become a voice in favor of just tweaking Judaism here and there. But Jesus was not a tweaker of religion. He was a prophet, a revolutionary prophet. Asian Christians knew very well that they could be hauled before a Roman magistrate or governor and threatened with death if they persisted in their witness to Jesus.

Executions of Christians were probably rare in those days. More often their witness to the gospel would not be before a judge, but at the market where they asked a fair price for goods; or in conversation with their boss; or when they told their family why worship on the Lord’s Day was an important part of their lives, despite not being a day off work in the Roman calendar. The risen Christ was alive in them as they made their faithful witness.

The third title John uses appears also in Colossians 1:18. Jesus is the “firstborn of the dead.”

This title goes to the heart of the fears of those early Christians. One of the stories that came out of Uganda in the 1970's from the brutal regime of Idi Amin concerns Pastor Kefa Sempangi. One Easter after preaching in the local football stadium, five of Amin's secret police followed him to his church and pointed rifles at him. The captain said, "We are going to kill you for disobeying Amin's orders. If you have something to say, say it before you die."

Shaking, Pastor Sempangi replied, "Do what you must. The word of God says that in Christ I am already dead, and that my real life is hidden with him in God. It is not my life that is in danger, but yours. I am alive in the risen Lord but you are still dead in your sins. May he spare you from eternal destruction."

The captain looked at the pastor for a long time before lowering his gun and saying, "Will you pray for us?" Their minds were changed and so were their hearts and their behavior.

You and I are more likely to die in a traffic accident than to be killed for confessing faith in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, we will die. Most of us can readily recall the names of friends and relatives who are no longer with us. The risen Lord does not say, "There's nothing to dying." A man who had been crucified could not say such a thing. The risen Lord does say to us, "You can approach your death with hope in the resurrection. I am the firstborn; and you will follow me not only in death but

also in resurrection. You will live with me." That's the foundation of all our hope. In the birth order of God, it's Jesus first, then we also will rise.

John caps off his litany of the names of Jesus by calling him "Ruler of the kings of the earth." The Bible is not apolitical, despite what some people like to think. Scripture places the people of God firmly in the context of the great political upheavals of history, from the Egyptian Pharaohs to Nebuchadnezzar all the way to Pontius Pilate. Asian Christians at the end of the first century had to decide whether they were first Roman subjects and only secondarily subject to Christ, or whether their primary allegiance was to Jesus Christ, Ruler of the kings of the earth.

The Caesars of Rome certainly wanted to be called by that title. They fought and killed for it. Jesus gave himself to death at the hands of secular kings. His disciples were ready to fight, but Jesus forbade it. His way was the way of love.

Although it is highly unlikely that you and I will be threatened in any way because of our love for God in Christ, we are called upon to suffer a thousand little deaths... when we tell the truth in our business affairs,

When we are faithful in relationships,

When we give more than we take, even if taking is considered normal,

When we love our enemies instead of crushing them in defeat,

When we honor the Lord's Day, the day of resurrection,

When the kings of the earth, by whatever title, do not rule our lives, but we are ruled by the king of heaven and earth.

Whenever we are faithful, we will rise, for that is the promise of God at Easter.

And we will rise.