

Epworth Chapel on the Green
May 1, 2016
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Acts 14:8-18
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:22-22:5
John 14:23-31

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus continues his teaching on the importance of love. It is love which binds together and unites God the Father, Christ, and Christ's followers. Because of that, those who follow Jesus are never alone, even if Christ is not physically present with them. This is possible, of course, because of the Holy Spirit, the promised Counselor.

In addition to this, Christ promises that his followers will have a home with God, and that the Father and the Son will come to dwell *in* and *with* God's people.

This is precisely what is shown to us in John's vision in the Revelation. John draws us in to his visionary experience, where we are invited to catch a glimpse of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city -- and where we are given a small taste *now* of the joy we will share when God's plan reaches its complete fulfillment in Christ.

This prompts me to want to ask you a simple question today: How long has it been since you've thought about heaven? How long has it been since you really contemplated the reunion of God with God's people? How long has it been since

you reminded yourself that you are merely a tourist in this world, that this world is not your final home?

If it's been a while, I invite you to pause for a moment this morning. Stop for a moment, and with John, allow your heart to dream again of the world God is bringing forth.

The world as we currently know it is a world that is broken and hurting. *But* God is working to heal our broken world and make it new.

The world as we currently know it confronts us with tragedy and disaster that takes our breath away. *But* there is coming a day when sorrow and sighing will flee away.

The world that we live in is a world where disease and suffering often surround us. *But* there is coming a day when all suffering of mind and body will be a distant memory.

The world in which we live is a world where sometimes all we can do is sit and put our face in our hands and weep. *But* a day is coming when the tears you cry now will be wiped dry by the compassionate touch of God's hand.

The world we live in is sometimes a mysterious and foreboding place, a place where answers don't readily come. *But* there is coming a day when the mysteries of life that trouble and perplex us will be laid bare, and when our faith will yield to sight.

The world as we know it is full of the stench of death. *But* there is coming a day when that most painful of human realities -- death itself -- will be fully and finally defeated.

The day is coming when we will be reunited with those who've gone before us in the faith. We will join them and millions of others as we take our place around the throne singing: "Amen! Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power, and honor, and glory, and dominion, forever and ever!"

One of the great criticisms of Christianity is that it is nothing more than promises of "pie in the sky by and by!" Christians are often labeled as those who are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. And perhaps those criticisms have a grain of truth to them.

But make no mistake today. The "pie" is real. Easter proves to us that it is real, and Easter faith makes it possible and real in our lives.

I don't know what your mental picture of heaven is like. I don't know the last time you may have allowed yourself to dream with John about what God is bringing into being. But there is one additional feature of John's vision that can be part of our dream this morning.

John tells us that the "nations" of the earth will walk in the light of the New Jerusalem, and that all the "nations" will bring their glory and honor into the city. In the New Testament, this term "nations" is primarily used to refer to Gentiles.

Do you remember all the prophetic hopes from Isaiah that the coming Messiah would be a light to the gentiles as well as to the children of Israel? Well, in heaven that hope is completely fulfilled.

This world as we currently know it is a place of great division, separation, enmity and strife. *But* there is coming a day when all racial, ethnic, and social barriers will be broken down; when divisions of class, status, and everything that unnecessarily separates human beings from God and from each other is coming to an end.

My great-grandfather was a minister of the Gospel for many years, and lived a life that was in many ways worthy of emulating.

But he had a problem with Roman Catholics. He genuinely believed that they would not be in heaven.

Then one day, his granddaughter announced her engagement to a wonderful man named John. He was a kind, gentle man. A man of deep faith. And, oh yes -- he was a Roman Catholic!

He married my cousin Claudia and together they had three children. And then John was stricken with cancer, and died before his 40th birthday.

I remember some time later asking my grandfather if he thought he would see John in heaven. The old man had mellowed somewhat, but he still was not sure.

Then, on Christmas day of 1989, my grandfather died of cancer.

I have this theory. I have this image in my mind of my grandfather arriving in heaven. The first person to greet him was St. Peter, who took him by the hand and said, “Claude, there’s someone here I want you to meet, someone whose been waiting for you.”

I can picture my grandfather turning around, expecting to see Jesus. And there waiting to greet him, arms open wide, was John -- cancer-free and smiling, with a grin on his face that screamed, “Surprise!”

There is one final portion of John’s vision that is noteworthy. The world as we know it is often a place characterized by reckless rebellion, a place where God is increasingly pushed to the margin, a place of spiritual lawlessness.

But a day is coming when evil in all its forms, together with all of those who reject and obstruct God’s loving purposes, will be no more.

It is ironic, because the heavenly city is a place where the gates to the city never close. And yet not everyone is allowed to enter. Membership is limited only to those whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Those who choose to put things or persons in place of God and become idolaters, and those who choose immorality and who choose to disregard God’s covenant laws designed to help us to be God’s people, will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

In a day and age of political correctness, multiculturalism, and diversity, the Church is called to announce that all claims to truth are *not* equal, and all roads do *not* lead to the same destination. But those of us in the church who are called to proclaim this message should do so not from a posture of finger-wagging moralism, but from a posture of those who are on their knees praying with tear-filled eyes.

As we prepare to come to the Table of the Lord this morning, I want you to remember something: the bread and the cup that we share is God's pledge to us that this promised future is real.

Each passing day draws us closer to its arrival. So come with gratitude in your hearts. Receive the grace Christ gives you. Then go forth living and loving as though all things are being made new. Because they *are*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.