

Sermon for April 24, 2016 (Pascha 5, Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Revelation 21:1-8; Psalm 148; John 13:31-35

Title: Those Who Conquer

“God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

My dear friends: what is the source of your hope?

Is it your own intelligence, your abilities and your confidence that you will be to handle anything that might come your way?

Is your hope based on your children and grandchildren, on the next generations and their ability to figure things out and make things better?

Do you find your hope in the prospect of a new national leader, in the arrival of one strong enough or wise enough to right the wrongs and to repair what is broken?

Whatever the case might be with you, make no mistake about it: human beings cannot live without hope.

HOPE is the one essential element that enables people to rise in the morning and to face the work of each day.

Hope is what God offers to those who are willing to see the experiences of life from a different perspective.

There is an amazing story from the old days of slavery in the South. It’s a story about how people who were suffering in the most profound ways imaginable found HOPE that sustained them through their hardships.

A young woman is out working in the hot cotton fields, working with the others, bending over and harvesting the crop. The overseer is close by, whip in hand, repeatedly striking another slave who failed to meet his standard.

Already in her young life, this young one has seen too much. She breaks down and cries out, “I can’t take it any more. I can’t take it any more. I wanna die!”

But there’s a wise old man nearby who hears her cry and he calls to her, “Don’t die, baby. Don’t die. Get dressed up and come with me!”

“So I got dressed up,” she reported, “and I went with him. You shoulda seen me, dressed up in the finest dress! And we walked together right over to hell, and right there I spit on the devil. And then we walked hand in hand right into heaven, right up to the throne of God! Everybody was there and we was having a grand ol’ time, dancing and singing and laughing.”

“And then, all a’sudden, CRACK! The whip came down and hit my back. And I looked up, and there was the master standing o’er me, ready to strike again.”

“But I laughed with secret laughter, because now I knew it. He had the whip, but I had all the advantage!”

He had the whip, but I had all the advantage.

How can that be? How could this poor slave girl have the advantage over the master with the whip?

If you look with only human eyes and human wisdom, you cannot see it. But if you know how to look deeply with the eyes of God, that advantage is real indeed, and it allows the suffering one to get back up and keep on going.

Human beings cannot live without hope. And this Book of Revelation was written to give hope to followers of Jesus who were suffering in horrible ways.

We have been, and we will be, reading from the Revelation to John throughout these Great Fifty Days. This can be a very challenging text, to say the least, especially if you do not remember the context in which it was written!

So let’s back up one step and remember that the entire story of this new community gathered around Jesus and the apostles was a story of love, hope and deep joy.

These people felt themselves to be loved by Jesus in the depths of their heart in a way different from anything they had ever experienced before.

He loved them, and they knew it. In their gut, they knew it!

But then he died a horrible and painful death. All seemed lost.

Until, early in the morning on the first day of the week, they experienced him ALIVE again! ALIVE! Can you believe it?!

In a new and different way than before, but profoundly alive.

They couldn't explain any of this at all, but they KNEW it was real, and they had to tell others about this. It was simply too amazing to keep to themselves!

And so these early disciples went around telling people this good news!
Jesus of Nazareth is the gift of God to the whole world, the Messiah sent by God to embody God's love and grace and forgiveness for all people!

What a wonderful story! And what good news! All was joy and celebration and love.

That is, until the persecutions started.

And in the year 64, the tide turned sharply against the followers of Jesus. The Great Fire destroyed three quarters of the city of Rome. Many believed that the self-indulgent Emperor Nero had set the fire himself, in order to make room for his extravagant new imperial palace that he wanted to build. But Nero decided that it was best to lay the blame on a vulnerable minority group who had no real power to protect them, so he declared that Christians were to blame for the burning of Rome and they were to be punished for it.

Things deteriorated quickly for the new Christian communities in the Roman Empire. It was widely reported that Nero was so depraved that he had Christians dipped into oil – baptized, literally – and tied to poles in his garden, then set on fire to provide light for his night-time garden parties.

If you want to understand this book known as Revelation, then you need to understand this sudden and shocking transition FROM an experience of overwhelming joy and celebration and love TO an experience of incredible pain and suffering and terror.

How did this happen? All that they intended to do was to love one another as they had been loved so deeply by Jesus, and to show everyone that they were HIS disciples by loving one another.

So why were they suffering so much?

What was God trying to accomplish, or attempting to teach them?

In this milieu of intense psychic stress and conflict and confusion and spiritual angst, John was given a series of revelations – visions which enabled the Christ people to stand up again and to keep on going.

You can't explain these things with human logic, any more than you can explain how a slave girl could possibly have the advantage over the slave owner.

These visions give hope to those who have no power to shape their own destiny.

But don't be fooled into thinking that they have no real-life implications!

Far from it! John does not imagine an ethereal and celestial realm of mist and clouds and stars, of spirit beings and light.

What he sees is a new city on a new earth!

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.”

HERE – on earth! Not up in the sky, in the sweet by-and-by. But right here.

John, and the slaves in the South, could see the victory of God's mercy and love over all those who corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

It was coming, and they could see it coming, and they could grab hold of it even now to pull it into the present and find hope to keep going, and to keep loving as Christ loved them.

Hope in God's justice. You and I can access this only when we choose to change our perspective, and to see reality from God's point of view, rather than seeing things in the ordinary way of human society.

We have to change how we see.

There is a famous story of Saint Francis who went out to preach the Gospel with his companion Masseo. They were walking and feeling quite hungry, when they came to a village. So, according to their Rule of Life, they went begging for food for the love of God. They split up and went different ways. After going through the village in this way, they met back together on the other side to eat what the villagers had given them. They found a spring with a large flat rock near it where they sat to eat, and Francis said to Masseo: “O Brother, we don't deserve these great treasures!”

Masseo looked down at the random pieces of bread which they had collected, and he saw something very different than Francis!

“Father,” he asked, “how can this possibly be a treasure? We only have a little bread, we have no tablecloth, no knife or dish, not even a table, no house to eat in, no servant or maid to wait on us. What are you talking about?”

And Francis replied, “This is exactly the point! Everything here is a gift of God’s Providence. We have this bread lovingly given to us, this beautiful table of stone and this clear fountain of water. This is an amazing treasure!”

It took Masseo a long time to understand what Francis was talking about. Most people in the world can never understand this.

But the vision of God allows us to see with new eyes, and in a deeper way. Hope in the ultimate victory of God allows us to live RIGHT NOW AS IF this were so. AS IF a slave girl being beaten in the fields is actually a beautiful, beloved daughter of God! AS IF simple bread and water is a feast from the generous hand of God! AS IF those who are suffering now are surrounded by the tender love of Christ, who longs to wipe away every tear from their eyes.

What is the source of YOUR hope?

And can you see that victory of God coming here on this earth? Can you grab hold of it even now and find strength and hope to keep on going as a people living by a new commandment: love one another? May it always be so. Amen.