

Sunday, May 26, 2019 – Sixth Sunday of Easter
“Better than Ever”

Revelation 21: 9-14; 21-27

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Text/Application Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Very good things – even the very best of things – can be misused and misunderstood. With the development of penicillin and a host of other antibiotics, a great gift was given to the world. A host of previously untreatable and usually fatal bacterial and fungal diseases could be not only treated but cured. Some of you remember when antibiotics began being mass produced – it really was a “Wonder Drug.” Diseases that had plagued human beings for thousands of years and killed off huge numbers of people, diseases that were pretty much untreatable – tuberculosis, leprosy, bubonic plague, cholera, just to name a few – could be successfully managed for the first time. How could anything be wrong with that?

What went wrong was the misuse of antibiotics. Sometimes they weren't prescribed in long enough durations to kill off all the bacteria – which left only the most hardy left to reproduce and create new, more powerful strains of these diseases. Sometimes, they were overused. And now almost 70 years later new, far more powerful forms of old diseases are a risk. Antibiotics are still a good thing – but we've learned they must be used appropriately and, human nature being what it is, they often aren't.

The vision God revealed to John is a world of perfection, where we live under God's light, where nothing impure will ever come in to tempt us away to sin – yes, the existence God has prepared for us is even better than Eden! Is it possible we could misuse a hope so great?

I want you to take a moment and do something unpleasant. I want you to consider the two or three most difficult circumstances in your life. What are the hardest things you've ever faced? It might be the death of a loved one, intense physical pain, emotional pain that lingers after someone that has hurt you, a feeling of guilt over something you've done, a feeling of

being ashamed of yourself, a divorce, a strained relationship with your family or friends, a crisis of faith, working through an addiction, a financial or employment hardship.

And in your most difficult circumstances, anyone here ever experience a well-meaning person make the most rude, most insensitive, most cavalier statement about what you're going through? I mean, a statement that was so condescending, so trite, just full of pious platitudes that you were just beside yourself, aghast that anyone could be so out of touch or possibly even cruel? What was it about those statements that were so... downright inconsiderate?

My suspicion is this – whoever made those insensitive remarks didn't know how to be with you in your pain. Yes, some people are just cruel but not most of the time. Some people have no sympathy, no personal understanding. They suggest you just need to pull yourself out of it and snap out of it already. Other people want to fix it, to say something comforting, and so they break out a box of Band-Aid's when what you need is the ER, hoping you'll start "working" right again. Sometimes people want to avoid sadness or pain in their own lives, so they dismiss the pain of others, "It's all going to be alright," "You'll get better," "There are plenty of other fish in the sea," or "It's over now, so you can move on and forget about it."

And you know, Christians have a tendency to use this remarkable hope, in fact our very greatest hope that we look forward to, in such a way? Have you ever heard someone say or thought to yourself, "It shouldn't matter what he did to me because God loves me," or, "I feel guilty for missing her, because when she died she went to be with God," or, "A better Christian wouldn't struggle with my issues," or, "It's a waste of time to allow myself to feel emotions like sad/angry/confused/hurt – whatever – because my real life is ahead of me and I know where I'm going?"

Is that it? Are you waiting for a real life yet to start? As you wait, hoping, perhaps on the edge of your seat even for this reality, this picture of our eternal life to become part of your everyday experience, know that God provides this for your comfort and hope. Also know that the point of this text is not to minimize the challenges of today. This is Jesus coming to walk

beside us in the midst of our struggles and hardship, giving us strength for today. The message is not, “Oh well, tons of hard stuff happens in life but I’m just going to take a step back and be unaffected by my world, or by my emotions. How sad it is when we use such a beautiful promise as this, on other people, or on ourselves to say, “I can’t have my emotions, I need to stuff them away for fear of acknowledging that I’m angry, or sad, or happy – my real life is waiting for me and I’ll be there soon!”

I say “how sad” because God intends so much more for us than that, as if our life now were some purgatory, some waiting room to endure while we look forward to our “real life” like is talked about in Revelation 21. No, this world was created by God too, and its brokenness is worth mourning over. Jesus is the best proof of this. He was not untouched. He was deeply involved, personally, emotionally invested in the lives of the people. He was invested in each moment He lived.

Look at him – He wasn’t just waiting around. He was there, with people, in their most difficult times. And He didn’t avoid His own challenges either. He wept at the death of His friend, Lazarus. He feared His own suffering in His prayer at Gethsemane. He took His mourning to another level and did something about it – He sacrificed Himself for you and me. He was there, He was in the moment. Yes, look forward with great joy and anticipation to the day of Jesus’ return, the day where you see the approaching New Jerusalem and you walk without need of the light of the sun or moon and only in the light of Christ. Get ready for it, it’s gonna be great!

But also remember that this, too, sick with sin as it is, is also God’s creation and that Your life now is filled with meaning and purpose – including purpose during the pain we feel after unpleasant moments. How do we use this resurrection hope then? How do we properly apply it to the life we lead going forward from today?

Remember that these words are not an escape hatch. Christians are not trying to transcend reality. This is not using discipline or the mind to make pain and suffering disappear by telling ourselves that our feelings are only illusions. Our God is not saying that we ought to

just concern ourselves with the perfect life that awaits and forget everything else happening here and now.

Quite the opposite, actually. Do you want to use this wonderful Scripture hope for all it's worth today? Yes it's true, you can enjoy hope for the day to come when Jesus returns, your eternal salvation is secure – that's good. But do you want it to make a difference for right now? Do you want to walk as a disciple of Jesus? Good? Then roll up your sleeves and invest yourself in this world. God's Word and His comfort in these verses are given to us not so that we can draw farther away from difficulties but to armor us so we can get even closer. Like a firefighter whose equipment enables closer proximity to the heat and smoke and flames, so too this comfort from God get us closer to the truth about ourselves – that we are sinners and deeply broken, hurting people. As we own that, confess that, repent of that and rely only on Jesus' forgiveness to make it, that shields us to enter that pain with others, too. Then, as our own discomfort melts away, we can be with others and share in their experience, rather than draw back with pious platitudes of, "It's all gonna be alright," or, "Don't worry, because you'll be in heaven some day," – after all, I think we say those things sometimes because it makes us feel better, not because it's helping someone else.

No, God gives us this comfort to get us through right now. He rolled up His sleeves and got involved – taking on flesh, enduring the stench of a manger, enduring authority by people he helped create, enduring pain and suffering and death. It was through that, that involvement, that He won for us the picture before us today, of a life even better than Eden. Jesus took that wonderful hope that we look forward to and imported some of it into our lives early, now, already. Resurrection joy is yours today – that's a hope so certain that you can even face the challenges of today. In Jesus' name, Amen.