



**FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

# **ALL THINGS NEW**

**REVELATION 21:1-6**

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When has there been a moment in your life when you have said to yourself, “this is new?” I don’t just mean a car with a few new features, or a new and complicated phone, or even a trip to a new city. I’m thinking more of major life experiences in which we think to ourselves: “Everything is going to different now. This is a whole new world opening up.” A way-marker in the unfolding years of our lives: there was the time before this new thing, and now there is what comes after. Like a birth, or a marriage; full recovery from a long and dangerous illness, or someone new coming to live and make their home permanently with you.

All of these major life experiences show up in the list of images John uses as he builds up this amazing picture of the new heaven and new earth.

I will be his God and he shall be my son, just past where we read in verse 7; a new birth. The holy city is like a bride dressed up for her husband; a marriage. There will be no more death or mourning or weeping or pain any more; the full recovery. And at the heart of the picture, the most important promise that gives meaning to it all: God has come to dwell with humans; the new permanent housemate.

This is not to say that the image John unfolds for us is small and commonplace and ordinary. But with all symbolism- and John uses a lot of symbols - these familiar things are like signposts pointing toward something unknowable that lies up ahead. John is saying, basically, that it’s going to be like this, but much bigger, so much more. The new heaven and new earth will be new in a new way; newness itself will be made new, as God makes all things new: new heaven, new earth, the new Jerusalem, the new Temple and last but not least, made-new people, too.

This vision at the end of the book of Revelation offers us the most wonderful picture of our future in all of Scripture. And it is a journey to get here. Whether we battle our way through the book of Revelation itself - heavily-encoded with symbolism and references to the Old Testament, written in a literary style utterly foreign to us today - or if we think of the journey as our own life or the life of creation, there is no line-jumping or shortcut to get here. The journey must be made.

Readers who have followed Christ the Lamb through the last exodus journey told in Revelation are now named as victors or conquerors who will inherit all the promises of God. The radiant new city fulfills all the old promises of newness, of abundance; of welcome and renewal for God's people. The oneness of heaven and earth, lost after the Garden of Eden, roughly re-created in the Temple, living, breathing and walking among us in Christ, symbolized by the Church, Christ's body during the long years of human history - the new heaven and the new earth, at last, we see in perfect unity, our forever-home, present and here.

Because this image of the new heaven and new earth is so big and so rich, let's give it the deep look it deserves. In Bible study, as some of you will know, when we encounter a big passage, we see who is in it, and what they're doing. We have three individuals in it: John, the "I" who is telling us what he saw; the "One," Christ the Lamb, who is showing John around, all through Revelation, and explaining what is happening; and God, who is doing all of the work.

John's verbs, and those of the One who is editorializing for him, are mostly in the past tense, because John is writing down his observations after he had them: I saw, I heard, he said.

Most of God's verbs are future tense, and mostly it's just the one: God will.

God will dwell with humans, he will be with them and will be their God; God will wipe away tears. And really, even the past tense stuff is John's report of what will happen, because he's looking at the future. And here is something interesting: John makes a subtle shift in verb tenses when he reports that the One who sits on the heavenly throne, in verse 5, is "making everything new" - that, at least, is present tense: what is always happening now.

It is worth noting that so much of what John sees as distinctive and extraordinary about this new heaven and earth is what is not there; what John expects to see when he looks at a human city that is not present in this vision Christ shows him. There are no more tears, and no more death, mourning, crying, or pain. In fact, there is, in the new creation, no more "old order of things" at all, because the first things have "passed away." There is also no more sea.

This absence of the sea is a little puzzling for us at first read - what's wrong with the ocean?

Well, in Revelation, the sea takes on a symbolic role. Here, the sea is a dark force of chaos, acting against God's people. Monsters, symbolizing yet further evil, emerge from it, and in the first heaven, it is described as being contained, but only just; it is still a powerful threat and great burden to the first heaven and first earth, to us and to our world.

Most biblical scholars believe that "the sea" serves as a reminder of evil's power, a power which now covers nearly as much of the creation as the sea does our planet. Evil's power ranges from the biggest stages, such as in Ukraine, to the smallest stages that include children who are bullied.

But in the new heaven and earth, there will be no more tears, no more chaos, no place from which monsters might again emerge.

This image of John's - this is it! This is green pastures and still waters, lions lying down with lambs, the place Jesus went to prepare for us, abundance and peace, delight and joy. This is what we've all been yearning and hoping for, together as God's people, for thousands of years. This is where we are going and the life we were created to live.

But right now, the old order is decidedly not yet gone. And living on this old earth is sometimes a painful, heart-rending experience.

There are moments, of course, of great beauty and wonder, treasured times with loved ones and times alone that elevate our spirits and fill our hearts. There is a lot of good in this world, and a lot of it could fall under the kinds of newly created life-giving things that John wrote about: new births, new marriages, new health, new person in our life.

But chaos and evil are still very much loose in the world, causing pain, suffering and tears, from the biggest, global stages to the most personal and intimate ones, from the great problems of our age, like climate change and nuclear weapons to the equally devastating suffering in our neighbourhoods, like homelessness, poverty and addiction.

The One on the throne tells John that he is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. It's not just another name for God; it's a description of the origin and destiny of human life. We originated with God, and we are destined to culminate, to come to fruition, in God in the end, too. And the process of human history is the sometimes painful, sometimes joyful journey from one to the other.

Philosophers and social scientists observe that human beings cope with the problems and crises of our world in distinctive ways, ways that affect what we do and how we make sense of our day-to-day lives.

Some people know that there are big problems out there, like climate change or systemic poverty; they recognize that those are bad things, but have no hope that any person can make a real, meaningful difference. Other people don't care about the world or other people; if there's problems and crises unfolding, so what? They have all they need, and they'll keep taking care of themselves.

Then there are people who want the best for everyone and for everything. They work hard and act generously and responsibly; they are making it in life or headed that way, and so could other people - the world, for them, is an okay place, no big changes needed, all the problems fixable with enough hard work and the right solution. Many people of faith and good citizens are like this.

I'm not sure any of them have got it entirely right.

One of those philosophers, who wrote about hope and freedom, defined hopelessness or despair as simply hope that has lost its bearings. When we hold the truth of John's revelatory vision of the new heaven and new earth up against the present truth of a world that seems to hold as much of evil as it does of good, we are left with a question: how do we hope for the future and live in the present, and not lose our bearing on hope?

I wonder if some of you might remember a particular sheep-friend of mine, who lives on my parent's farm, named Delilah. Delilah is doing well this spring; she had her lamb the Tuesday after Easter. Now that the snow has finally melted and the grass is turning green, she and her lamb and the rest of the flock are currently wandering their familiar pastures, munching on grass and eyeing up the trees and enjoying the sunshine.

Delilah loves to round up her lambs and stride out across the pasture, going into the farthest corners and eating her fill. But during the winter, things are very different.

The sheep have their barn and the barnyard, where they can go outside and eat hay and get a little exercise and weak winter sun if it's not too cold. Often, it is very cold. All the gates to their pastures are closed; snow lies deep in the barnyard and deeper across the fields.

Delilah has long had a habit of wandering away a bit from the other sheep, wading out through the snow towards the gate. She will, sometimes, just stand there, knee deep in snow, letting it build up on her wool as it falls, and just stare, unblinking, through the gate, the first gate we open for them in spring, eyes fixed on that empty, snowy wasteland.

And after a bit, she'll drop her head and turn around and go back to being the pragmatic, hard-working ewe that she is: eating her hay, growing her lambs in her belly, doing ordinary, productive sheep things.

Being very fond of Delilah, I think of her as one of the great philosophers of the barnyard. I imagine, then, that when she is doing her thousand yard stare up across those fields, she is remembering.

She's remembering green grass and tender clover, wide open spaces and crunchy leaves; warm weather and soft, gentle breezes, winters past that turned to spring, eventually.

And she is answering our question for us, too, because, as she gazes out over a world of snow and cold and grey, wind-swept skies, Delilah tells herself a story of hope.

Remember how I was telling you about philosophers and social scientists who have determined that human beings cope with the problems and crises of our world in distinctive ways, that impact how they go about their lives.

There are the "see the problem and despair" types, the "I'm okay and I don't care about you or the world" types, and the "want and strive for the best for everyone, but the world is fundamentally doing okay" types. But some people take the harder approach to problems and crises and hope.

They look at the world and see all the things present in it - like poverty, abuses of the natural world, illness and addiction, violence and all the rest - and know these problems to be too big, too deeply entrenched for them to fix. And then they drop their heads, and turn around, and go back to acting generously and with hope that what they do will make a meaningful difference, writing their own few lines of the much bigger story that is being written into creation.

We can be honest with ourselves and each other and with God about how much work we sense that God still has to do, and not forget to tell our story of hope. But like most things on this old earth, it is easier to hope together than to hope alone.

Psychologists say that we need peer scaffolding. Peer, like friends and family and colleagues and fellow church-goers, and scaffolding, well, we know what that is around here: the jungle gym of bars and platforms and ladders used to build new things and fix old, breaking ones.

We need other people who hope the same way we do to keep on hoping ourselves: to stay motivated, to make meaning rooted in our shared story of hope, to celebrate our success and urge us to try again and keep going when things are hard, so our hope doesn't lose its bearing during the fierce struggle that will re-create the world.

The book of Revelation, along with all the other apocalyptic writing in the Bible, was intended to first reveal that struggle to us, and then to be a story of hope, the story of a hopeful future that gives meaning to our actions in the present, no matter what obstacle or crisis we face. A more comfortable, familiar apocalypse in the Bible is the one from the Gospel of Matthew, and I'm sure many of you will remember this: Jesus tells how, when he comes again - at the end of history - and all of humanity is rounded up before him, he will separate out the sheep from the goats. To the sheep, Jesus will say, come and take your inheritance. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, needing clothes and you clothed me; I was sick and you looked after me, in prison and you came to visit me.

And of course, it wasn't Jesus himself in person that they did those things for; Jesus taught that any time we do those things for someone who needs them, it's as if we were doing it for Jesus himself.

This teaching is foundational for us; it tells us what it means in our story of hope when we bring a bag of groceries for the food bank, or introduce ourselves to a visitor in our church, or support refugees fleeing Ukraine and Syria and a dozen other hostile situations.

My bag of groceries or my friendly smile or me holding someone's hand and praying with them when they're dying - I can't eradicate hunger or solve the refugee crisis or undo death; but God can. And I do those things as often as they need doing because I have hope that God will.

People still suffer, weep, mourn and die. But John's vision in Revelation 21, the promise and hope that God is making all things new, tells us that none of those things are the end, none of them will have the last word. God will have the last word, and that word is life. Thanks be to God. Amen.