

This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

“I’ll be back.” Has anyone made that promise to you before? I hear those words, and besides the Arnold Schwarzenegger/Terminator reference, I think of someone who’s planning to be gone for a good chunk of time, but they promise they’ll come back. Like maybe someone who goes off to college for the year or a soldier who’s deployed overseas for six months.

And that promise puts you completely at ease, right? Or are there sleepless nights and days full of angst and wondering and worrying about your loved one. It doesn’t end until that person returns, all safe and sound.

Today, Ascension Sunday, we’re reminded of a similar promise Jesus made to come back. And he’s been gone much longer. But you know, there’s no need for the worrying, the wondering, the sleepless nights. He’s left us, but it won’t be for good. Our Risen Lord Reveals Himself to Us. Our Redeemer Will Return in Peace!

You know, where our gospel for this morning ends and where John’s vision from Revelation falls in the timeline of history, they both really bookend the period of time where we are right now, in the End Times. I’m talking about the time from when Jesus left this earth to when he will return again.

Now, Luke seems to short-shrift us in his Ascension account, merely telling us that Jesus took his disciples out to the area outside of Bethany, blessed them, and left them, being taken up to heaven, and that was pretty much it. But Luke also wrote the book of Acts, and there he gives us a little more details of that day. There, Jesus gave his disciples the same charge he’s given you and me: “You will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.”

And then, he left them.

But the disciples kept staring into the sky, maybe half-expecting Jesus to reappear, standing next to them, “Haha, I fooled you, just kidding,” maybe the other half a little disheartened that their Lord, their friend, had finally left them. They didn’t want him to go.

It was then when two angels gave them comfort and encouragement, “You don’t need to keep looking up there. He’s gone. But this same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

“...will come back the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” Fast forward to John’s vision in Revelation 19. Surely this can’t be the same person the angels promised the disciples would return again...in the same way. Jesus, who ascended into heaven so peacefully, it certainly wasn’t a grand celebration or a massive ordeal. But that’s not what we see here.

Can you envision it? Looking up into the sky, to the heavens, and standing in the midst of the clouds, with a magnificent light radiating behind him and from him stands our Redeemer. The rider on the white horse. I know other parts of Scripture describe this moment as being announced by thunder and

lightning and Jesus returning amidst loud trumpet blasts. There's really nothing about his return that's the same with the way he left.

Should we be so surprised? Isn't that often how people return from a long absence? Like after a year of college, they look older, hopefully act a little more mature. Or maybe at a high school ten year reunion, everyone looks so different, so grown-up, and they're at different places in their lives. Or even someone who comes back after a traumatic experience, who's seen death, they return, but they're never really the same.

So it will be with Jesus. The one we've seen ascend to his heavenly throne so serenely, he returns as a king, armed and ready to wage the greatest battle this world has ever seen. Our verses say in "justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns...He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood...The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty."

Whoohoo! Very different indeed. What are your first impressions of this rider? That rider truly is God almighty. Jesus, the powerful king whose blazing eyes and many crowns are signs of his omniscience and his omnipotence, all-knowing, all-powerful. Which means he knows you. He knows me. He can see right through us. He knows our every thought, our every word, our every deed, good and bad. There's nothing we can hide from him. Not even our sins.

The times you lie, just so you can cover your backside...like at work, the paperwork didn't get faxed on time, you missed your deadline, the boss comes storming into your office, ready to tear into you, but wait, it's not my fault, the secretary must have lost the paperwork somewhere. Jesus sees that.

Or the promises we make but don't keep, like, yes honey, I promise I will fix the bathroom sink this week, and then a month later, yes honey, I promised I will get to that bathroom sink this week, and that keeps going. Jesus sees that. Or yes, I guarantee I will be at church this Sunday or I'll definitely help out with that event, and then you never show. Jesus sees that.

Or there's the nasty words we say about others when they're not around. "Did you see what Brad was wearing today...what a slob. Looks like a hobo." Or, "I know I shouldn't say this, but did you hear about the Johnson family and everything going on there? I probably shouldn't say anything, but I think they're cheating on each other. And their children are just terrible, always fooling around, running wild. Not surprising with those horrible parents." Jesus sees that. He hears that.

And you know, we could keep going with sin after sin after sin, pigeon-holing ourselves, our own lives. All of it, Jesus sees it.

And one day soon, Jesus will return to this earth, and he stands ready to judge, to do something about sin. John says, "Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations...He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty."

What a stern reminder those words are, that though we may go through this life and may never see the consequences of our sins or suffer for any of them here, at Judgment Day, Jesus stands ready to judge. The punishment he holds back to allow us time to repent will one day be carried out in full on the unrepentant. It's those whom he will crush beneath his feet in holy wrath and righteous anger much like the wine-maker stomps the grapes in his winepress, flattened, destroyed.

That's a serious warning God issues here, one that makes us frightened of him, and rightly so. Because of our sins, which Jesus sees all of them, we deserve to be those grapes smashed by the fury of Jesus' wrath. We are part of the nations who deserve to be eternally struck down by sharp sword of the justice of Jesus, the rider on the white horse.

Yes, to many in the world, one day, this picture will scare them to death because that rider on the white horse returns to render justice and judgment.

But that's not the effect it will have on us. We don't need to be afraid. You know why, don't you? Look at how our risen Lord reveals himself to us. Look at all the names given to him here. He's called Faithful. He's called True. He's called the Word of God. He's called King of King and Lord of Lords.

Our risen Lord is Faithful. The book of Deuteronomy describes him this way, "Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands."

Jesus has remained faithful to that covenant of love, the covenant which stipulated that Jesus, in his unconditional love for us, would live the perfect life we can't, would die on the cross to take away our sins, all of them, even the ones we don't think anyone else can see. And then, Jesus rose, the covenant complete, our assurance that when we see that rider on the white horse, it's for our eternal deliverance, no reason to be frightened.

Our risen Lord is True. He's consistent and loyal. Yes, that means he will carry out the threats he makes in his Word, that "whoever does not believe will be condemned." But by that same token, his love is just as consistent, so that even though "the wages of sin is death (both physical and eternal), but the gift (free of charge) of God is eternal life" and "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Our risen Lord is the Word of God. He is the one who reveals to us our sins, all forgiven. He is the one who reveals to us the way to life in heaven, through him and him alone. And our risen Lord is the King of kings and Lord of Lords because in heaven, we will all be kings for whom Jesus is the true King. In heaven we will be the lords who serve the Lord forever. We will be the royal children of God, crowned with righteousness and eternal glory.

You know, our verses say the rider's name is secret, but you look at how he's described, and it's really no surprise who he is. This is our Jesus who looked sin, death, and the devil in the eye, didn't bat a lash, and then completely annihilated them.

I mean, you notice how he's the only one with blood on his robe? The rest of his army of angels, they're dressed in fine, white linens, but their clothes are clean. Not our risen Lord's. Can you see why? Because when he returns, he will take vengeance on all the blood shed by his enemies, the enemies of his church. When our Redeemer returns, his cloak will become stained with the blood as he walks among his enemies, our enemies, slain on the battlefield, crushed under his feet, just like with a winepress.

But you know what that stained cloak means for us, don't you? The same way Jesus left, in peace, that's how he returns, bringing us peace. When Jesus returns, the war is over. His stained cloak means peace for us. Not just the peace of forgiveness we enjoy during our lives here on earth, but the eternal peace of living with our Redeemer in heaven forever, away from this world, this life of sin.

So even now, because we know we have peace in Jesus, who has ascended, that changes everything. We could just sit here and wait for Jesus to come back, but that's not what he wants. He gave his disciples the charge to be his witnesses, and he gives that same task to us, to share that heavenly peace by our entire lives. So when I talk, I'm going to speak in a manner that pleases God, who gives me peace. When I do anything, I'm going to act in a way that shows love and gives glory to God. Jesus' ascension and his promise to return in peace, that now affects my entire life, not because I don't know when my Redeemer is coming back, but because I know he's coming back and I want to be ready. I want to live for him, and you do too.

I'll be back. How many of you have sleepless nights wondering, worrying if your Redeemer is going to return? Hopefully none of us do because we can be certain he will return. We don't have to have nightmares of this Rider on the white horse because he, Jesus, our Redeemer, will return to bring us peace. And with that promise, we rest securely. With that promise, we live for him. Amen.