

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
May 18, 2025 – 5 Easter
Acts 11:1-18; John 13:31-35; Revelation 21:1-6
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

When a person is ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, the Bishop says to that person, “Now you are called to work as a pastor, priest, and teacher.” This morning I am going to sound very much like a teacher. Here, as in any group gathered for worship in the Episcopal Church, you have different levels of knowledge and different spiritual experiences. Some of you may already know what you are about to hear. I hope, though, that there is something for everyone to learn as I speak about this morning's lessons from scripture.

First, our lesson from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. This book can be unfamiliar territory because it appears only occasionally in the Lectionary, and unlike the Gospels, we never read the entire book at any time in the three-year cycle of scripture readings. Congregations may therefore not have a clear idea of when events in the Book of Acts are taking place.

Acts covers roughly 30 to 40 years of the first stages of the life of the Jesus movement, from when it was a small group of Jesus' followers and their immediate associates, until it became organized enough to have local congregations and established leadership. The events of the book open in the period immediately after Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, around 30 CE, with the Ascension of Jesus after his post-resurrection appearances. Acts closes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial; Paul, and Peter (whose ministry was covered mostly in the first half of Acts), were executed by the Roman government sometime probably in the later 60s CE.

This three-decade period was a crucial one for the early community, because as a group they made decisions that would have an impact on the growth of the movement, and that still have importance for us today. Acts explains how the early Christians gradually separated from their Jewish culture, by deciding that those attracted to the Jesus community did not have to follow the Hebrew law of the Bible first. The decision is presented in Acts largely as one of dietary restrictions: abstaining from certain foods, like pork, for instance. Sharing meals in the culture of the time meant sharing a whole culture, not just food. To accept the idea that the dietary restrictions in the Bible no longer applied, and that Jewish Christians and non-Jewish converts could eat together meant that Christianity was becoming its own religion, and it made possible conversion on a much wider scale than previously. The account of Peter being assured in a vision that dietary laws were no longer essential for the followers of Jesus would likely have been early on in the history, say 35 or 40 CE.

A lesson that we can take today from the reading we heard this morning has to do with inclusiveness. The issues are different for us now than they were in Peter's day, but the principle is still relevant. In Peter's vision God expanded the definition of what was “clean” and thus permissible to eat. The Jesus movement expanded to include

Gentiles as well as Jews. The ministry of Jesus had also suggested that boundaries accepted in his day were to be opened – for foreigners and for women, for example. As we consider current issues, this guiding principle of greater inclusiveness should be taken into account for these reasons, among others.

Next, I want to consider our lesson from the Book of Revelation. When I thought that I would begin by saying that this section of the Bible was written by John of Patmos, I decided that a list of the “Johns” in the Bible might be helpful. John, like Mark and Mary, was a popular name in New Testament times. “John” is a Hebrew name, “*Yochanan*” or “*Yehochanan*,” meaning “the Lord is gracious.” The fact that there are several characters named John can lead to confusion and misidentifying one John with another. Here are the persons named “John” in the New Testament.

John, son of Zechariah, “the Baptist.” John the Baptist appears in all four Gospels, and in histories of the time such as Josephus’ account of Judaism in the Greco-Roman period. Early in Jesus’ ministry John the Baptist is executed by Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great. You are probably familiar with the story of the dance of Salome and Herod’s promise to grant her wish – John the Baptist’s head on a platter.

John the disciple or apostle, the brother of James and a son of Zebedee. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, are often referred to in the Gospels. For example, they asked to sit at Jesus’ right and left hands when he came into glory, a request that was not well received by Jesus!

John, the author of the Gospel. This morning, before I read the text, I said the familiar words: The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John. This attribution of authorship is not actually in the text of the Gospel, but it is traditional. It is not clear if the author is identified with the apostle John, but this identification is not accepted by all scholars.

John of Patmos, the author of the Book of Revelation. This author is not otherwise known. He is clearly not the same person as the author of the Gospel of John, since there are obvious differences in the language of the Gospel and of Revelation. In the eastern branch of Christianity, the title “theologian” is given not to academics but to people who have had a direct divine experience. The author of the Book of Revelation is honored as the first of these in the Christian church, and he is called “John the Theologian.” In older English usage, a theologian was known as “a divine,” hence the title “St. John the Divine.” You may know the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. I was ordained there.

Two other people in the New Testament are named John, but one is a very minor character – John, the father of Peter – and the other, John Mark in the Book of Acts, may be the same as “Mark” in Paul’s letters. Neither is confused with any of the other characters named John.

The “beloved disciple” in the Gospel of John, named as a witness at the end of the Gospel, is nowhere identified as “John” or as the direct author of the Gospel.

Now that we have reviewed the “Johns” in the Bible, I would like to offer an overview of The Book of Revelation. This book is an example of an ancient literary form, apocalyptic, which was familiar in the centuries before and during the early years of the Christian church, but is not popular in our day. The Greek word “*apokalypsis*” and the Latin “*revelatio*” both mean “removing the veil”: the veil being the endless flow of daily events that make it impossible for us to see beneath them to the underlying meaning of history. In an apocalyptic text, we are shown the true reality beneath the surface of historical events: a narrator, an ordinary human being, is conducted by a heavenly being on a sort of tour of reality in which the real history of the present is shown – a battle between good and evil.

This battle is depicted literally, with heroes and villains committing what looks like widespread slaughter. The original audience for an apocalyptic text was usually a community that was oppressed by a governing empire, and the violence might have been a kind of compensatory revenge, but the role it plays is one of symbolizing the moral struggle – within society and inside each individual – between good or just living and oppressive, unjust social structures.

Apocalyptic texts generally have a happy ending, in which good has triumphed and the reign of justice and peace has begun. The Book of Revelation exemplifies this, with the “new heaven and new earth” established after the destruction of the old creation, and the “marriage” of Jesus with the people of the restored community. This is why God wipes away all tears at the culmination of the story.

The reading we heard this morning is sometimes chosen to be read at funeral services. In the Episcopal Church we think of funeral services as Easter services, grounded in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. At funeral services we affirm our faith in the ultimate victory of God, of goodness over evil, of life over death, of joy over sorrow. In this Easter season, may we strengthen our faith in God’s victory and follow our Lord’s command to love one another. In Jesus’ name. Amen.