

“The Saints Live and Reign with Christ”

His name is Andy Jacobson. He grew up in Milwaukee. I met him for the first time freshman year of high school and we became good friends. Played baseball and basketball together. Roomed together senior year of high school and were co-captains on the basketball team that same year. We decided, along with several other of our friends, to go to Martin Luther College and study to be pastors. It was the last couple days of summer vacation before our junior year of college when I got the phone call from my brother: Andy was dead. He worked on a road construction crew in the summer. It was the end of his last day of work and while driving one of the work trucks back to the shop he took a corner too fast and rolled the truck. 20 years old. Athletic, smart, personable, studying to be a pastor. I'll be honest, 26 years later, it still makes me cry. You probably have your own “Andy” story. Whether it was expected or unexpected, many of us know the pain of saying good-bye to a Christian loved one. Today, God helps dry our tears and ease our pain by giving us a glimpse of what our Christian loved ones are doing right now. Their bodies temporarily sleeping here on earth, but their souls are alive and well in Heaven. Rev. 20:1-10.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven. He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ²He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, ³threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end. After this he must be released for a short time.

⁴Then I saw thrones, and those who were sitting on them were given the authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵(The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years came to an end.) This is the first resurrection.

⁶Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years.

⁷When the thousand years come to an end, Satan will be released from his prison. ⁸He will go out to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. They are as numerous as the sand of the sea.

⁹They came up over the broad expanse of the earth, and they surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. ¹⁰And the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are. There they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever.

This weekend of the church year is called “Saints Triumphant.” A saint is someone who is perfect, holy, sinless. This word “saint” is a beautiful reminder of God’s grace. None of us deserves such a title as “saint.” Our sinfulness should exclude us from such a lofty title like that. Yet, as the apostle Paul often reminds us in the New Testament Scriptures, **“give thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”** (Colossians 1:12-14). Through the connection that God the Holy Spirit has given to

you and me to Christ Jesus through faith, God the Father now views us differently, as perfect, holy, sinless saints. **“This is the first resurrection...blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection.”** (Revelation 20:5b-6a) John says. Jesus put it this way in our Gospel lesson from last week. **“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life”** (John 5:24).

As we gather here today we are the “Saints Militant.” We are still fighting against the spiritual forces of evil that seek to destroy each Christian’s faith in Jesus. We are still struggling as we deal with the discouraging impact that sin has upon our world and our day to day lives. Yes, Jesus is spot on with his assessment, **“each day has enough trouble of its own”** (Matthew 6:34b). And one of the earthly struggles that we fight against is the pain associated with losing a loved one to death. God speaks specifically to that struggle today. Yes, your Christian loved one’s body remains here on this earth waiting to be raised by Jesus on Judgment Day and reunited with their souls in Heaven. But until that glorious day happens, find comfort in what your Christian loved one’s soul is already enjoying. **“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast and his image, and they did not receive his mark on their forehead and on their hand. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years”** (Revelation 20:4-5). A couple of things to keep in mind as we interpret these verses and the book of Revelation in general. Revelation is a series of visions that God gave to the Apostle John and asked him to write down for the benefit of Christians past, present, and future. These visions each look at the same time frame in history, with each vision focusing in on a different aspect of this time frame in history whether in Heaven or Hell or on earth. The book of Revelation, while teaching us real things, uses symbolic language to do so. A key principle to keep in mind when interpreting Scripture, and especially symbolic sections like Revelation, is to let Scripture interpret Scripture. What we mean by that is that no conclusions that you come to after reading Revelation will disagree with other parts of Scripture. Or to put it another way. Other easier and clearer parts of Scripture help us to understand more challenging parts of Scripture like Revelation. Now, back to the verses that were just read. Notice the souls of Christian martyrs are living and reigning with Christ in Heaven right now! They would not give in to the beast (false prophets), but instead were willing to experience physical death rather than renounce their Christian faith. And now they are Saints Triumphant reigning with Christ for “1000 years.” Keep in mind that the numbers in Revelation are not literal. The 1000 years is referring to a definite long period of time. If you look at our sermon lesson this 1000 years started at this moment in time. **“Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven. He had the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. ²He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, bound him for a thousand years, ³threw him into the abyss, locked it, and set a seal on it, so that he could no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years come to an end. After this he must be released for a short time”** (Revelation 20:1-3). The moment being depicted here is Jesus death and resurrection as he completed the plan of salvation which won the war against the evil work of the Devil. Even though he has lost the war, the Devil continues to fight, trying to bring more souls to suffer in Hell (Abyss) with him. While he continues to win some victories, keep in mind Jesus already won the war and even limits (chain) the evil work of the Devil. The 1000 years ends at this moment in time. **“When the thousand years come to an end, Satan will be released from his prison. ⁸He will go out to deceive the nations that are in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. They are as numerous as the sand of the sea. ⁹They came up over the broad expanse of the earth, and they surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven**

and devoured them. ¹⁰And the Devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are. There they will be tormented day and night, forever and ever" (Revelation 20:7-10). These verses reference the very end of the 1000 years where the Devil will be unchained again. Every generation wonders and feels like they are living in that season just before the end. But the 1000 years will end with the Devil and his evil co-workers being thrown into Hell to be punished for eternity. This "1000 years" starts with Jesus completing the plan of salvation and ends with Judgment Day. That has already been longer than 1000 years strengthening the understanding that this isn't referencing a literal 1000 years. The best way to understand the 1000 years is that this is the New Testament era of history. It's a definite long period of time, known only to God, between Jesus death /resurrection and Judgment Day.

Now, let's get back to the comfort this portion of Scripture brings to us as we still struggle with the sting accompanied with the death of our Christian loved ones. Revelation 20:4-5 seems to be referring to Christians who were martyred for their faith in Christ. How especially comforting that would have been to the first readers of Revelation where losing your life for being a Christian was more common than it is today. Most likely a martyr's death is not the story of your Christian loved one who died. Even so, take comfort in these words, "**Blessed and holy is the one who has a share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them. Instead they will be priests of God and of Christ. And they will reign with him for a thousand years**" (Revelation 20:6). Just like the Christian martyrs, your Christian loved one's soul lives and reigns with Christ. Living and reigning with Christ means you made it, victorious! Living and reigning with Christ means just like Lazarus eternity is a place of perfect comfort. Over is the fight and struggle of the saint militant on earth. Living and reigning with Christ means no more tears or disgrace, but a celebration that will not end as Isaiah taught us this morning. Even the second death of Judgment Day can't change their current status. Right now and forever your Christian loved one is living and reigning with Christ. They are one of the Saints Triumphant! And for you and me, the Saints Militant, continue to gaze at John's vision because through faith in Christ we can look forward to this same existence. "**Encourage each other with these words**" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). Amen.