



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Easter 2

April 27, 2025

He Holds the Keys Revelation 1:4-18

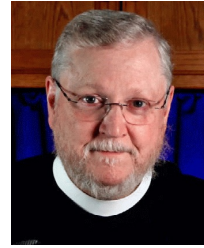
⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶ and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

⁸ "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." ⁹ I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

¹² Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

John's prologue to this profound book is profoundly Trinitarian – as he greets his readers (the seven churches) from God the Father (the One who is, who was, and who is coming), God the Spirit (the seven spirits), and God the Son (Jesus Christ). This is the only book of the Bible with such an explicit imprimatur, indicating that the Book of Revelation is the culmination of all scriptural revelation, and thus the imprimatur can rightfully be applied to the entirety of Scripture, and that there will be no more speaking from God until Christ comes again at the Last Day. This ought to heighten our awareness, beloved, that the time is near – the time of judgment, to be sure, but for us who believe,



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it is also the time of blessing in the soon coming presence of our risen and ascended Savior, Jesus Christ.

For “Behold, he is coming with the clouds,” writes John, which calls to mind Jesus’ words to Caiaphas, “You will see the Son of Man . . . coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mat. 26:64). The return of Christ is coming, dear friends, sooner than we think.

While many in our time scoff at this thought, joining their voices with those who persecuted, tortured, and killed Him, all people of every time and place will see His coming, even those who pierced Him. Unbelievers, past, present, and future, will be forced to acknowledge that He is the only Savior of mankind, and those who have rejected Him will “wail on account of Him,” suddenly struck with the too-late realization of what their unbelief has done to them, for it will have landed them outside the benevolent mercy of God, to be separated from Him for all eternity.

For it is the eternal God Almighty who says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” meaning the first and the last, the beginning and the end, signaling His indisputable authority and rule over His creation. This is the same God who unloaded on the questioning Job, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” . . . “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (Job 38:2, 4a). No one will be so foolishly brash as to question Him on that day. How often have I heard people say, “When I get to heaven, I’m going ask God why He did this-or-that or allowed this-or-that to happen.” No you won’t! You won’t dare to open your mouth to this One, except to praise and thank Him for all His undeserved grace toward you.

John, writing from exile on the Island of Patmos, was given the grace of this revelation and directed to share it with the seven churches. He is the only person ever to be permitted both to see and describe the exalted Christ. St. Stephen saw Him at the right hand of the Father and was comforted by the vision and strengthened in his death, but he gave no detailed description. Paul was met by Him on the way to Damascus and was once taken up into the third heaven and given revelations, but he gives no description of Christ. John alone was granted the grace not only to see, but also to share the vision given to him.

In describing the glorified Christ, he draws upon a number of sources from the Old Testament, particularly from the prophet Daniel, but he also draws from his own experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. There he saw a brief glimpse of Christ’s glory – a peek, a momentary preview of what was to come. Now he sees that glory in all its fulfillment. The promise, seen prophetically by Daniel and momentarily experienced by John at the Transfiguration, stands now before him in all its everlasting beauty. In reflection, John realizes that his Lord is now in this glory because He has completed His work through His death and resurrection.

So what does he see? He sees the Son of Man, the Lord Christ, in a long flowing robe, such as worn by the high priest, whose role He has perfectly fulfilled. He sees a golden sash tied around His chest, which was typical with this kind of robe. Such a sash



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indicated royalty, reminding us of the three-fold office of Christ: prophet, priest, and king (after the order of Melchizedek). His hair was white, like wool or snow, commanding respect and honor. The image is similar to the Ancient of Days described by Daniel in the seventh chapter of his book. The Son of Man is due this glory and honor because He has successfully completed His commission to establish – through His death and resurrection – an everlasting kingdom, a kingdom that will never end.

The eyes of this Son of Man are like a flame of fire. In Scripture, fire symbolizes the holy purifying presence of God, before whom only those purified can stand. The holy presence of God destroys evil. The penetrating glance of Jesus while on earth held a foreboding of righteous anger for those upon whom it fell. John now sees these piercing, fiery eyes in the exalted Christ, on whom the Father had bestowed authority to destroy evil and purify His people.

His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace. Under these feet lie death and the grave as vanquished enemies. His voice was like the roar of many waters. If you've ever been to a place like Niagara Falls, you know that sound. I got a sampling of it at the World War 2 memorial in Washington. The sound of all that water is utterly deafening. Christ's voice is the mighty voice of God. The one before whom John stands is, in every way, the exalted Son of Man, the very majestic and glorified God.

What else does John see? He sees that the Son of Man has in His right hand seven stars, which represent the angels of the seven churches, by which the Lord comforts His church through the sevenfold presence of the Spirit. But, in particular, the angels represent the human messengers of Christ's Word to His church. The two-edged sword proceeding from His mouth indicates that the Son of Man will execute the judgment of God according to His Word (Law and Gospel).

Lastly, John mentions that His face was like the sun shining in full strength. Throughout Scripture, the sun is used as a metaphor for God, particularly for His glory. Malachi 4:2 says that "the Sun (S-U-N) of Righteousness will arise with healing in His wings. Matthew's account of the Transfiguration recalls that Jesus' face was like the sun. John writes toward the end of Revelation that "the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev. 22:23). The exalted Christ is the person in whom the glory and life-giving light of God are now present.

What does this vision, this revelation, do to John? It knocks him to the ground like a corpse. No human can stand before God in his own merits and live. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus revealed only a portion of His glory, and still John and the others fell on their faces in reverent worship. Here, He gets it full blast and is completely overcome as though he were dead. Do you think you will fare any better, you who think that your good works are sufficient? Compare your deeds to the Apostle John. How many miracles have been wrought by your hand? When have you been banished to a deserted island for proclaiming the truth of Christ? Jesus said that the apostles would sit on twelve thrones.



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Has He said that of you? John was one of three disciples invited up on the mountain to witness Jesus' transfiguration. From the cross, Jesus commended His mother into John's keeping. Our good deeds, beloved, many as there may be, don't hold a candle to those of St. John, and yet he fell as though dead before the glorified Christ. You and I would do the same.

But Jesus was not content to leave John on the ground. He came to him, put a comforting hand on his shoulder, and said, "Don't be afraid." "I am the first and the last," He said, "and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore." Died why? And for whom? For John, for you, for me. To save us. To do everything necessary for us to stand before Him and live. To stand in His presence without fear. To see in His glorious face the compassion, the care, the love that compelled Him to endure the cross, despising the shame.

Finally, Jesus says, "I have the keys of Death and Hades," the keys of death and the grave. Your Savior holds the keys, beloved, the keys to open the gates of heaven and lock up death and hell forever. These He won by His unfathomable passion and agonizing death. These He freely exercises on behalf of all who believe in Him. Let the world mock as it may. One day we will all stand before Him. What will that be like for you? Will He raise you up and bid you not to fear? Or will He say, "Depart from me, for I never knew you?" Faith and trust, dear friends – faith and trust in His death and resurrection for you – these are gifts given freely in His Means of Grace, and they make all the difference for time and eternity. They're yours if you want them. I pray that you do. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen