

A Key Experience

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany

Revelation 1:9-18



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."*

A man once told me, "You know, I've been standing in front of closed doors my whole life." As a child, he wanted to go to prep school but was rejected. "Not suitable," the letter said. He tried to get an apprenticeship, but the company went bankrupt before he could start. He applied for other jobs and received 50 rejections. When he finally found a job, the company closed two years later. He met a woman, fell in love, and she left him. He tried again, and again the relationship fell apart. He applied for an apartment—rejected. A loan for a small car—rejected. Attempting to change careers—"Unfortunately, we cannot offer you a place." He said, "I ran from office to office. Employment office, social welfare office, housing office. Always the same worn-out corridors, the same waiting numbers, the same tired faces behind the counters. And always the same answer: "Sorry, there's nothing we can do." The man looked at me and said, "At some point you ask yourself: Am I the problem? Did God close these doors? Or did I just never learn how to open them?" This man is not an isolated case. Many of us know the feeling of standing in front of closed doors. Sometimes it's an illness that suddenly thwarts all plans, making the path to the future seem blocked. Sometimes it's unfortunate situations like those described above. The people of Iran have been experiencing this for decades. The hope that things will get better is repeatedly dashed with a loud crash and blood on the streets.

The apostle John experienced something similar. As Jesus' beloved disciple, he was just as amazed as the other disciples by Jesus and His resurrection. He was equally amazed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the rapid spread of the gospel. But then, it was as if a door had slammed shut and the entire Church had suddenly been abandoned by God and Jesus. The door to heaven was closed! The emperor mercilessly persecuted and killed Christians. John himself was exiled to the island of Patmos. It really seemed as if all doors were closed and there was no way out—neither for John, nor for the Church. But it was precisely during this situation that a key was placed into the locked door, the door was opened, and light and confidence flooded into John's dark situation. The door to heaven is cracked open and John has a key experience. He sees Christ, the risen one. The key experience was that he was seized by the Holy Spirit. He did not have to do any long preparatory work. The Holy Spirit himself became active. All this happened on the Lord's Day, a Sunday. On a day when the other Christians were holding

services in their hidden chambers, God opened a door and, through His spirit, brought together what belonged together: The churches with the apostle.

John said, “Then I turned around...” The word John uses here is peculiar. In Greek, it does not mean a physical turning around, as when one turns one’s face from one direction to another, but rather it is an inner turning around. For example, the same word is also used for “conversion.” What is meant here is that John gained a completely new perspective. The apostle, who was over 90 years old and a witness to the resurrection of our Lord, did not have to undergo a new conversion. However, he saw something that changed everything else. It was a key experience that would be decisive for him and for all time. It was a completely different viewpoint. The key question here in this different view is none other than this: “Who is Jesus?” John knew Jesus well. He also experienced His victory over death firsthand. But now, it looked as if Jesus was no longer there. Instead, it seemed that the emperor had seized power and overthrown Jesus from the throne. John gets a glimpse into heaven and sees the risen Lord, clothed in a robe that immediately identifies Him as a king and priest. In His hand, He holds seven stars. At that time in history, there was a Roman coin and, on this coin, it was the emperor himself who held seven stars in his hand. The meaning of this was clear: through the coin, the emperor claimed that he held the entire universe in his hand and should therefore be worshipped as a god. John’s vision shows a glimpse into heaven and reveals that the emperor is a liar and deceiver. Instead, it is Jesus who holds all power in His hand. He holds the seven stars of the universe in His hand. This Jesus stood amid seven golden candlesticks and these candlesticks were symbols of the Church. This makes it clear that Jesus Himself dwells in the midst of His Church. This referred to churches that existed at that time, but John’s vision is timeless and shines through to our time. We ourselves are the Church. John’s vision shines through and reminds us of who truly has the keys to the Church. No emperor, no dictator, no scoffer, not even AI has power over the Church—only Christ Himself.

During John’s revelation, it quickly becomes clear that these seven churches that have gathered around Jesus are by no means perfect. Jesus Himself has many words to say about their weak faith, their lukewarmness, and their false teachings. Yet Jesus is right there in the midst of it all, remaining in His Church. That is a great comfort to us. When I as a Christian or we as a Christian congregation, feel marginalized and overwhelmed by the events of our world, John’s image opens a window to heaven and shows us a completely different reality. This reality is different from our daily experience. Just as Jesus had much about His disciples to criticize and yet said to them, “You are the light of the world,” so too, despite its many weaknesses, the Church is a beacon that radiates the light of Christ. John knew Jesus. He had seen the risen Lord, and then it seemed as if Jesus was no longer there. That is why Jesus had to explain very clearly to John: “I am the First and the Last. I was dead, and now I am alive.” The living Jesus in the midst of His Church breaks the locks of hell and death. John sees this and falls to the ground as if dead. The Lord Himself must lift him up and encourage him: “Do not be afraid!” John knows about the bitter experience of the Church and his own imprisonment, but Jesus envelopes all of that with His life and shows him what is truly important, Who is truly alive, and Who truly holds the keys. Jesus encompasses everything that makes up our lives and everything we can or cannot do. It may be that in this or that situation, we find ourselves standing before closed doors. When we think of our own death, the lock of death is a bolt that excludes us from the world we know—forever.

Jesus shows us the other reality. Death is no longer a prison. He has the key. We may find ourselves standing before closed doors in this life. In times like these, it is important that we not only keep our eyes on Jesus but also take on a new perspective—a life-changing perspective—a key experience that envelopes all other experiences we have. For He is the light of the world, and our light. John’s gaze falls upon Jesus, and we too should follow his gaze. Only in this way will we be and remain the Church. It may be that many other things stand in our way or even want to challenge and define us. But these things all have only temporary significance. Christ, the First and the Last, is our spring of life and our strength. For He lives, even now, in the midst of His Church. Amen.