

“All Things New”
Revelation 21:1-5a, 10-14
5th Sunday of Easter (Music Sunday)

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Westminster, Greenville
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When I was meeting with the Pastor Nominating Committee eight years ago this spring, we were discussing this church, and the history of Westminster, and one of the topics that came up was along the lines of things that are sacred at Westminster, things that any incoming pastor would be wise NOT to change.

For example, the committee made it very clear that traditional worship is sacred around here, that Westminster is not looking for a pastor to come in and start an alternative worship service. I said that is perfectly fine with me, I am as traditional in Presbyterian worship as they come.

Now one thing the committee did not mention—and it’s not their fault, I don’t know that I would have thought to mention it had I been in their shoes—but one item they did not mention that I have since learned is sacred around here...**is summer donuts.**

How many of you are looking forward to the return of summer donuts after worship? It’s only 3 weeks away. I mean, truly, there is no world in which I would pull the plug on summer donuts.

What’s interesting to me is what summer donuts represent. Believe it or not, they have spiritual significance.

Are they...an incentive to get one’s children excited about coming to church in the summer?

Absolutely. A means to pass the faith down to our children.

But the donuts are about more than the joy they bring our kids.

Perhaps more than anything, those donuts represent a profound theological truth: **we all need something to look forward to...**

Isn't it true?

We all need something to look forward to...

Any elementary school, or middle or high school students here?
How many of you are counting down the days until the last day of school?

It's something to look forward to...

Lauren has a sabbatical coming up.

Lauren, how many hours until you begin your sabbatical?

We all need something to look forward to...

The writer of Revelation, John of Patmos, knew that need very well. The churches to whom John wrote, likely at the end of the 1st century, were suffering.

We don't know the exact cause.

What we do know is that it was costly to be a follower of Jesus Christ back in John's day. And John wanted to give those who would read his letter—that's what Revelation is, a letter—he wanted to give those early followers of Jesus something to look forward to.

So he describes a vision.

A new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

And John didn't just invent this vision.

It came from the prophet Isaiah, our first text for today.

It came from a promise God had made long before.

A promise that “death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more....”

A promise that one day, God will make all things new.

Do you know how powerful it can be to have something to look forward to?

You see, John knew...it doesn't just change the way we view the future. Having something to look forward to has the power to change who we are in the present.

A number of years ago, a story was published about a school teacher whose job not only involved teaching kids in a classroom, but who was trained to visit children in her school district who happened to be hospitalized.

One day, this teacher received a call that sounded very routine. There was a boy named Charlie in the hospital. And his class was studying nouns and adverbs.

Could she go visit Charlie and work with him on his nouns and adverbs, in the hospital, so he doesn't fall behind the rest of his class?

Absolutely.

What no one had told her before she went to visit Charlie, but what she learned when she arrived at the hospital, was that Charlie was in the burn unit.

Terribly wounded.
In pain every day.

She wasn't prepared for this at all.

But this was her job.
She couldn't turn around.

So she found Charlie's room, and she walked in, and she told him, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your [school teacher, Mrs. so-and-so], she sent me to help you with your nouns and adverbs" today.

Even saying this, it sounded ridiculous to her.
Charlie needed to heal!
Why was she there?

She stumbled through his English lesson, embarrassed that she was putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning, she was back at the hospital to visit another child, when a nurse from the burn unit saw her, approached her.

Said to her: "What did you do to that boy?"

The teacher started to blurt out an apology, but the nurse interrupted.

"You don't understand. We've been very worried about Charlie. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment—it's as though he's decided to live."

Later, when he was out of the hospital, Charlie admitted that until that teacher came into his room, and went through her lesson, he had given up hope.

But after her visit, he thought to himself, “They wouldn’t send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?”¹

Charlie knew it.

Charlie the power of having something to look forward to.

Of course, it’s also true that what we look forward to—
doesn’t always happen.

I imagine that there are any number of people in this room here today who have hoped for something in your life, planned on some future for a loved one in your life, and then that future was somehow snatched away...in moments like that, what do we do?

The 19th century abolitionist, writer, and statesman Frederick Douglass once addressed an antislavery meeting at the very moment when the abolitionist movement had come under unusual strain. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had emboldened slave catchers, returning many escaped people to bondage, and filled abolitionists with frustration and despair.

Douglass delivered a somber assessment at that gathering.

He lamented that the cause of abolition seemed stalled, that the nation was complicit, and that the enslaved remained in chains despite years of moral appeal. He wondered aloud whether there was any hope left for justice.

It was at this point that Sojourner Truth, sitting in the audience, rose and called out to Douglass in her commanding voice:

¹ [Nouns and Adverbs | Sojourners](#). I added the name “Charlie” for the purposes of the sermon, as the boy was not named in this story.

“Frederick, is God dead?”

Her words jolted the assembly, reminding everyone that despair denies the presence and promise of God. Douglass himself later recalled the moment as one that shook him out of his discouragement.

One hundred years later, for the great theologian Howard Thurman, Sojourner Truth’s question was not a rebuke but a “summons back to spiritual center.”

As Thurman preached in the mid-1960’s, “when all visible signs of progress fail, when the cause of justice seems lost, when even the prophets fall silent in fatigue, then faith itself must speak — not as optimism or denial, but as the stubborn fact of the spirit.”²

Friends, it is that stubborn fact of the Spirit, the movement of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives that we ALWAYS have to look forward to...

Do you remember how John puts it in our text?

“And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”

In other words, John doesn’t trust his own abilities to provide a roadmap for the future.

He trusts the Spirit!

He relies on the promise and power of the living God!

It’s what we always have to look forward to...

² I am indebted to Mark Ramsey’s essay, “Every Day Is Not the Last Day,” from the Ministry Collaborative, November 4, 2025, for this story.

And the good news of the gospel is that there is NOTHING we can do to stop that Spirit from pursuing us, from changing us, from redeeming us, in ways we cannot see right now.

John's word to those seven churches long ago is the same as his message to us:

Trust the stubborn fact of the Spirit.

Trust in the Spirit's goodness.

Trust in the Spirit's grace.

Trust the Spirit's ability, not just at some future day,
but in your life today,
to make things new.

Speaking of new, I have a vivid memory of a time when something was new to me—probably not so new to many of you here today, but at this moment in my life, almost thirty years ago now, it was new to me.

Here's what happened.

After I graduated from seminary, but before I began my first call in Texas, I was helping a friend of mine drive from Oregon to Washington, DC. He was moving. We got a Ryder truck. We drove all the way across the country, hauling his belongings.

One night we stopped in Tennessee.

It was late, we were hungry, we found a diner.

We sat down in the booth and the waitress came over.

I felt like having a late-night breakfast.

“I’ll take some eggs, scrambled, with hash browns and bacon, please.”

The waitress took the order, and in five minutes returned with the meal.

I looked down—

there were the eggs, bacon, potatoes...

and then there was a pile of this white stuff.

I asked my friend what the white stuff was.

Now he had lived in Tennessee at one time, so he laughed and said, “Ben, I think those are grits.”

Being from Michigan, I was still a little suspicious.

So I called the waitress over: “Ma’am, what’s this?”

“Them’s grits,” she said.

“But ma’am, I didn’t order grits.”

And she smiled at me—

“Honey, don’t nobody ever order grits. Grits just come.”

So it is with the stubborn grace of the Spirit.

It’s something each of us can look forward to...

Amen.