

*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.<sup>10</sup> And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*“Salvation belongs to our God,  
who sits on the throne,  
and to the Lamb.”*

<sup>11</sup> *All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,<sup>12</sup> saying:*

*“Amen!  
Praise and glory  
and wisdom and thanks and honor  
and power and strength  
be to our God for ever and ever.  
Amen!”*

<sup>13</sup> *Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”*

<sup>14</sup> *I answered, “Sir, you know.”*

*And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.<sup>15</sup> Therefore,*

*“they are before the throne of God  
and serve him day and night in his temple;  
and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.*

<sup>16</sup> *Never again will they hunger;  
never again will they thirst.*

*The sun will not beat upon them,  
nor any scorching heat.*

<sup>17</sup> *For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd;  
he will lead them to springs of living water.*

*And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Revelation 7:9-17)*

### **Who are these People?**

Last Sunday was Confirmation Day here at Peace. We were blessed to hear eleven young people confess their faith and promise to follow Jesus even if it costs them their lives. What a privilege! But did you notice that in one way, last week we copied this week’s sermon text? Think about how that service went. At the very beginning, I led those young people in and they were all dressed like I was. All twelve of us were wearing white robes. At the end of the service, we assembled here in the front of the church to take pictures, and many of their parents posted those pictures on Facebook. Again, all twelve of us wore white robes. Now, those kids did not arrive at church wearing their white robes. They put them on here. I was with them before the service, and I noticed that every single one of them was dressed up. The boys were wearing ties and some of them were wearing suits. The girls were wearing dresses. Almost all of them looked like they were wearing brand new clothes that their parents bought just for that occasion. But you couldn’t see those clothes during the service. They were covered in those white robes.

Those robes really stood out. We had a lot of visitors for church. Most of them were family and friends who came for the confirmation. But what if someone just happened to visit us last Sunday? What if they knew nothing about the Lutheran Church and our traditions, and they were sitting here when I led those confirmands into the sanctuary? They might have echoed the question that the Apostle John was asked in our lesson for

today, “Who are those people dressed in white robes?” Since you and I know who those eleven young people were, we’re going to focus on the people John saw in the text. We want to understand what John saw and why God had him write it down for us. It all begins with that question: **who are these people?**

## I.

The book of Revelation is a series of visions, so we always have to ask the very Lutheran question, what does this mean? To answer that question, we have to study the images God shows us in the light of all he tells us in the Bible. When it comes to this multitude of people wearing white robes, God gives us a series of clues about who they are. The first clue comes in the opening verse: **they come from every nation.**

Now the truth is, it’s no big mystery who these people are. When John says, **“There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb,”** I think most of us get to the answer pretty quickly. This is the church. This is the assembly of all believers in Christ gathered around God’s throne in heaven. So, our question then is really less about who they are than it is about what we can tell about them from this description. The first thing we see is that they come from every nation, tribe, people and language. That’s how they become a great multitude that no one can count. John saw the church they way that God sees it. God sees all true believers gathered together as one. He sees heaven almost overflowing with the crowd of people there.

But that’s not what we see, is it? We see the church shrinking. We can look out our windows this morning and see all those cars going by. I wonder how many of them are going to church? Today is Mother’s Day and all over the country, people will spend real cash going to restaurants. That’s great. Moms work very hard for their children and kids should recognize that. But if you add all the Sundays of the year together, how many people who will spend big money on Mother’s Day today will get inside a church even once this year? It feels like the church is shrinking in America today. It feels like people just don’t care about the things we stand for anymore. And it also feels like the church is deeply divided – because it is. Too many churches simply refuse to listen to God’s word. On Easter Sunday, a newspaper published an interview with the new president of one of the oldest seminaries in America. She laughed at the idea of heaven. She thought it was ridiculous to say that Jesus paid for our sins. She scoffed at the concept of God answering prayers and rescuing us from pain and suffering. She dismissed the whole idea that Jesus was the Son of God. And she is the president of a Christian seminary. It’s no wonder the church is divided.

But all of that is only what we see. God sees something else. God sees our faith. God sees all the believers of every time and place. And God will eventually gather us all together with him in heaven. When that day comes, there will be no false doctrine anymore. They will be nothing to divide us anymore because there will be no sin anymore. Jesus will gather us around the throne of God and we will be truly one. We will see just how many people God saved and we will marvel at the reach of the gospel. We will rejoice because we will finally understand all that God has done for us.

## II.

Of course, that church’s most obvious feature in the vision is those robes that they wore. That’s such a crucial part of the church’s identity that our confirmands imitated them by wearing white robes last Sunday. But did you notice the one big difference between our confirmands’ robes and the ones John saw? We ordered the confirmation robes. They came to us clean and white. But the people that John saw had to wash their robes. That tells us something very important about who the church really is: **they have washed their robes.**

One of the elders in the vision asked John, **“These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”** John didn’t know, so the elder told him, **“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** Notice two things about washing those robes. What they washed them in and when they did it. They washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Now, I don’t do a lot of laundry, but I’m pretty sure that when my wife throws my white shirts into the washing machine, she doesn’t use blood for detergent – not even lamb’s blood. If she gets a stain on a white blouse, she doesn’t use blood to bleach it and make it white again. Blood stains clothes. It ruins them. And people knew that back when John wrote this. But God showed him an image of people whose robes had been made pure white by washing them in the blood of the Lamb. You know, of course, what he was talking about. The Lamb of God. Those white robes stand for their lives. Only the blood of Christ could make their lives clean and white in God’s eyes.

What creates the church? The gospel does. But what is the gospel? It's the good news that we are forgiven for Jesus' sake. It's the promise that we will live with him forever because he has washed all our sins away in his blood. Today is a wonderful opportunity for us to remember how important that is. Mother's Day was invented presumably because some people thought that mothers don't get enough appreciation. Whatever the motivation was for the people who invented this holiday, God designed motherhood. He calls every mother to care for and teach and love her children. But do we kids always appreciate their efforts, even after we've grown up? Every mother is a sinner and falls short in some aspects of that calling. But how often don't we children hold that against them, sometimes all our lives? How many of us can remember saying terrible things to our mothers? How many of us have caused them pain and sorrow? How many of us fathers have fallen short in encouraging and helping the mothers of our children? And how many mothers among us feel guilty because they haven't come close to being the parent God called them to be? We are all sinners. For all that sin and failure, God should condemn us all to hell. To God, the robes of our lives should be black and stinking and filthy. But Jesus came. And he died and paid for all those sins. Jesus came and he loved and honored his mother like no one else ever could. Jesus lived and died and rose again to take all that sin away. He washed our robes, our lives, in his blood and now God sees every one of us as holy and perfect.

That's the other thing to notice about those robes: when they were washed. The elder said, "**They have washed their robes and made them white.**" It's already done. It was done on the day Jesus rose from the dead. It was done on the day God gave us faith. In our baptisms, God washed our sins away. Nothing can change that or undo it. Our robes are spotless in God's sight.

### III.

There's one more thing to notice about who those people dressed in white robes are: **they come out of the great tribulation.** What does that mean? For a generation at least, one wing of the church in America has misunderstood that expression as the last stage before Jesus comes and set up some kind of millennial kingdom. But that's not what John meant. The great tribulation is life in this world. Let's be honest: life hurts. If it didn't, you wouldn't ever need me during the week. But hundreds of times every year, I visit people in hospitals and nursing homes and in their own homes. Eventually, I'll have to visit your family in a funeral home. And it isn't just the hurts that we deal with individually. Have you watched the news? Wars and rumors of wars. Famines and earthquakes and disasters. The love of most growing cold. All these things, Jesus said were signs of his coming. We see them every time we open our newsfeed or turn on the TV news.

But it's all temporary. The church will survive. The church will be rescued. We will come out of this great tribulation and gather in heaven. Jesus will return and put an end to the tribulation, and we will live with him forever. That's really what this lesson is a picture of: us living with Jesus forever. Notice what God says, "**They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple ... Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. ... For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.**"

When we go home, we live with Jesus. We serve in his temple and he cares for us. Today is commonly known as Good Shepherd Sunday. We often think of Jesus shepherding us here. That's totally true. He cares for us every day that we live here. But he's going to do that in heaven, too. He's going to do that after the resurrection forever. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. The point is that all that God promises us finally and completely comes true only when we see Jesus. He does hear our prayers now. He does watch over us and care for us. He does turn all things to our good and shepherd us right now. But it's all leading to that day when we are with him forever and nothing sad ever happens again. On that day, we won't have any scars or issues to work through. We will be at peace. We will rejoice. We will live with him forever.

Did you notice what we'll be doing: again and again in this reading we sing Jesus' praises. You know what? We won't want to do anything else. It will be our greatest joy to sing to the one who loves us. And I do mean us. That's the whole point today. Who are those people? Who has come from every nation? Who has washed their robe and made it white? Who comes out of the great tribulation? It's us. It's you and me and those confirmands who wore those white robes that can't compare to the robes we'll wear then. Two thousand years ago, the Holy Spirit led John to write us into this lesson so that we can know that we belong to Jesus forever.

That's God's gift to us today. In a little while, we're going to go home. I hope that all of us adults whose mothers are still living plan to call or visit our mothers and wish them a happy Mother's Day. I hope that

every child here today takes the opportunity to think about how much their mothers do for them and to thank mom and to thank God for giving them such a wonderful blessing. But I also hope that we remember today is a celebration of the Lord who gives us our mothers. Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus cares for us by providing those mothers. But above all, Jesus cares for us by giving us the good news that we will live with him in heaven forever. Celebrate his love today. Amen.