

## **“Resurrection Peace”**

By Scott Runyon  
First Baptist church Birmingham  
Online Worship  
April 19, 2020

Revelation 22:1-6

### **Welcome**

It is wonderful to be back here again with all of you, our family of faith. We logged in or called in this morning because we desire to be with our God and with each other. We are looking for light in the darkness, peace in the craziness, and hope in the face of loss. In the common every day homes that we hang in, we long to find a respite, so we gather here together in this space we are creating around our God.

It reminds me of part of a letter that a man named Paul wrote nearly 2000 years ago to some people in a town called Colossi. He wrote about how God gave purpose to all things. Look around you in your living room or kitchen. All things and all people are united in Jesus' resurrection. It's a beautiful picture! Listen to what Paul wrote.

### **Colossians 1:15-20** (The Message)

*We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For*

*everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.*

*He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.*

### **Prayer**

God be near to us this morning that our hearts and minds might be united in you, and that together we might find our purpose vibrating within us. Amen.

### **Invitation Song** from John Emery

## **A Message About Robert Lowry Composer of the Song “Shall We Gather At The River?”**

### **Vic Camaione**

You may recall that several years ago we did a program in worship where people were each assigned composers of famous songs and each person came into worship on a different week and reported as that composer in character. I was assigned to be Robert Lowry, an American Baptist pastor, who wrote the hymn "Shall We Gather At The River?" which he wrote to comfort his parishioners who were in the grips of a great epidemic. I recently sent Pastor Scott an email about what I learned about Robert Lowry's message to his people and Pastor Scott asked me to share it with you today.

We will share the words of this well-known song a little bit later in the service.

This song has been used in many movies and is often associated in popular culture with people going down to the river to be baptized but I was astonished to find out that is not at all what Robert Lowry had in mind when he wrote it.

It was the heat of the summer in 1864 at the end of the Civil War and Brooklyn was suffering through

a major epidemic. Many people were sick and many died. I thought of the stories my grandmother told me about the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918. She was just a little girl. She lost her mother, two sisters, and two other relatives in the same week. It hit every family in a similar way. Also, last summer while visiting Katie, she took us on a tour of the Elmwood Cemetery in Memphis where many historical people are laid to rest. There were periodic waves of Yellow Fever and other epidemics that passed through the city. There were several sections in the cemetery which were mass graves of people that died in epidemics. As we drove through the cemetery we would pass by yet another mass grave from another epidemic. One of the few things people could do was to leave the city to try to escape the epidemic. They probably just ended up spreading it further. We heard of one young doctor who came to Memphis to take care of people but died 8 days after he arrived. Historically, epidemics were much more devastating than the current corona virus,; Any attempt to fight the epidemics seemed futile and hopeless. I find it impossible to imagine.

In the midst of hopelessness, sadness, misery and loss from the epidemic, Robert Lowry recalled

the passage from Revelation Chapter 22 “Eden Restored” about a crystal clear river with water of life, issuing from the throne of God and the resurrected Jesus, flowing down the main street with the tree of life on each side, all presented by an angel of God. If the Tree of Life sounds familiar, it does come from Genesis but it is not the same as the more famous Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life was the tree in the middle of the garden and it is symbolic for eternal life which is why Adam and Eve had to leave the garden and why God set a guard at the entrance to Eden. Revelation can be a difficult book to understand and it is interesting that it came up briefly as a topic at Men’s Breakfast this week. I can’t quote exactly, but Jim Poe reminded us that that when studying Revelation, we should keep in mind that in spite of appearances, God is always in charge and we can trust God to bring his people through every trial. It is a message for our time. In spite of appearances, God is always in charge. Trust God to bring his people through every trial. I think that I understand more now than ever about the message that Robert Lowry was trying to give to the people.

In Robert Lowry’s time as during the Spanish Flu or the Memphis

yellow fever epidemics there was very little that people could do to fight the disease. There was little that he could offer to his people but he composed the song “Shall We Gather At The River” inspired by Revelation 22 to give them hope and to remind them (and us) that God has prepared a place for all of us. We eventually meet back at the Garden where it all started. How remarkable that is!

We can’t imagine why God would allow the coronavirus to exist but let us acknowledge that we are blessed by things Robert Lowry couldn’t imagine — better science and medical technology, respirators, ventilators, masks, and other protective equipment. We also have the radio, TV, telephone, the internet, and social media to help us to keep in touch, join in worship together, and to provide direction from our leaders. We have all of the helpers the doctors and nurses, respiratory therapists, people that staff the hospitals, fire and police the store workers, the people in the supply chain and everyone else who is risking to help to keep us going. Remember Mr. Rogers mother who said in troubling times “Look for the helpers.”

Let us be hopeful and remember in this resurrection season the lesson that Robert Lowry shared with his

people and with us. That in spite of appearances, God is in charge and we can trust God to bring us through every trial.

### **Shall We Gather At The River**

Robert Lowry

*Shall we gather at the river,  
Where bright angel feet have trod,  
With its crystal tide forever  
Flowing by the throne of God?*

*Yes, we'll gather at the river,  
The beautiful, the beautiful river;  
Gather with the saints at the river  
That flows by the throne of God.*

*On the margin of the river,  
Washing up its silver spray,  
We will talk and worship ever,  
All the happy golden day.*

*Ere we reach the shining river,  
Lay we every burden down;  
Grace our spirits will deliver,  
And provide a robe and crown.*

*At the smiling of the river,  
Mirror of the Savior's face,  
Saints, whom death will never sever,  
Lift their songs of saving grace.*

*Soon we'll reach the silver river,  
Soon our pilgrimage will cease;  
Soon our happy hearts will quiver  
With the melody of peace.*

### **Message**

I so appreciate how Robert Lowry shifted focus from the horrendous death and despair that people found all around them toward the saving, redeeming, resurrecting love of God. From a place of constriction to a space of liberation. From a place of pain to a space of peace.

Whenever I read chapter 22 of Revelation, I get that feeling of transition, and shift of focus. If we read Revelation from the beginning, we find a lot of confusing images and symbols that don't seem to make sense.

Throughout the book we get lots of pain and destruction, so much conflict and tension. Then, at the end, in chapter 22 we get this scene that forces us to pause, to take a deep breath, to shift our focus. And knowing we are okay, we can look around us at the glory of God in a space of peace.

If we listen, we can hear the birds singing and feel a gentle warm breeze. We can hear the gentle splashing of water over rocks in a river. We can feel God's radiant light warming our faces and hands. Everything has slowed down. Our racing hearts level out and we get calm and can breath deeply.

This is not a scene of complete stillness. There is actually a lot happening, but it is happening from a space of utter peace where all busy-ness is no longer important. All preoccupation with the past has evaporated. All concern or worry about the future has faded away. The only thing important is what is happening right in front of us and around us, because we are bathed in love and light and comforted by an environment that rings true of the character of God.

This scene, this picture, is of the fulfillment of the resurrected world by the hand of God. This is the eventual culmination of Jesus' death and resurrection. This is a renewed humanity and a reordered world. This is where the faithful become caretakers of all creation alongside God.

Listen to the space between the words as I read this passage from Revelation 22.

**Revelation 22:1-6 (NRSV)**

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing*

*accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place."*

This, my friends is our hope! This is what we can set our eyes upon that will help level our heads and hearts in this season. This is where we are heading. May God's peace that transcends our ability to figure stuff out be close to each of you today and every day.

**Prayer**

God allow the light of your love to shine in us and remind us of your care for us and all things around us in our homes. Lift us up and give us the courage we need to endure this season, and through your Holy Spirit give us the encouragement of peace. In the name of the Father who created all things, the Son, whose redeeming action prepared the way for all creation to be renewed, and the Holy Spirit,

who guides us along life's path,  
never leaving us alone, Amen!

In a minute you will hear some music and see a few slides that will describe the ways that you can give to the church and some announcements. But before that, I wanted to share with you what is coming in the next weeks on Sunday morning.

### **Unraveled**

Beginning next week, we will be starting a new series called "Unraveled." Many of us have been asking in this season "What is going to happen to me now that my world is unraveling and coming apart?" We are challenged to press on when our plans and goals begin to unravel into loose threads.

But if this isn't the end that we fear (and I would encourage you that it is not), inside of this unraveling, sometimes God will surprise us with unexpected joy, love, hope and even a new beginning.

Now, I don't think that God is giving us these challenging times, but as we come unraveled, God meets us here, provides opportunities in the midst of this, and guides us through the stories we find in scripture of others who also have come unraveled.

If you know someone who might benefit from hearing a message of hope as their life is unraveling, please invite them to the upcoming services.

Along with this series will be a study journal, that will guide you with poetry, art, prayer, and centering meditations to reflect on the themes for each week. I will email it out on Wednesday.