

This week major pharmaceutical companies backed away from a lawsuit against South Africa, where people were planning to acquire less expensive drugs to fight AIDS. At first the pharmaceuticals wanted to protect their product, but their approach seemed like extortion of dying people. Imagine living in South Africa where the threat of disease ebbs your security and disquiets your closest friendships. Some Catholic religious women in Africa say that some priests have raped them because they perversely thought it unlikely to contract AIDS if they had sex with nuns. That has to be a horrible world to live in.

The picture in the mideast is also bleak. Syrians, Lebanese, Israeli, and Palestinians seem locked in perpetual conflict. Even the holy shrines of Jerusalem offer no sanctuary. Imagine raising a child in a place where you hear gunfire as often as the call of birds.

At the end of the first century, Christians underwent their share of repression. They believed that Jesus was the Son of God. They believed he rose from the dead. They believed they would too. That made them unafraid of political might. If Roman authorities suppressed them, so what? Even if they were killed, they would only rise again to new life. This created enormous tension between the church and state.

Among the religious figures who suffered at that time was a man named John, probably not John the apostle. This John lived near the end of the first century, and because of his belief in the gospel and fearlessness of civic oppression, he was banished to Patmos, a tiny strip of island in the Aegean Sea. It was there on a Sunday that John entered deeply into prayer and saw visions that he recorded for the church in a book that now stands at the end of the bible, called Revelation. It is the source of the second readings we'll hear on Sundays throughout the Easter season.

In today's passage, John sees the risen Jesus, appearing like a human being, dressed as one of the visionary figures in the Book of Daniel. John falls down at the sight of this heavenly being, who tells him, "I am the first and the last, the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld."

At the beginning of this vision, Jesus establishes himself as the alpha and omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, indicating his complete power over time, over life, and yes over death. The first message of Revelation is that Jesus is alive, and that he reigns over all.

In the midwest, we do not face the same persecutions that others face in the world. Considering the prevalence of disease, violence, hunger, and poverty around our planet, our complaints about traffic and weather seem rather piddly. But if strangers die needlessly because drugs are too expensive, because gunplay is too acceptable, because food supplies are stockpiled, or because poverty goes unchecked, they do so because the most fortunate haven't done enough. Like John we can bring hope to all who suffer, by working with congress, by supporting charities, and by our belief in the resurrection.