

Sermon for Jubilate (Easter 4) – John 16:16-22

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” This sentence is repeated 3 times in today’s Gospel. That means it’s clearly something that Jesus wants us to know. Like any good teacher, He constantly repeated important things to let His disciples hear them over and over again so that it would sink into their consciousness and stick in their memory:

“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” What’s so important about these words? What does Jesus mean by them?

First and foremost, let’s figure out the original context: Jesus is speaking to His disciples on Maundy Thursday. What would happen the next day? He would die. Jesus would be separated from them for a while by death. But He would rise on Sunday and they would see Him again. The disciples would be distressed when they couldn’t see Jesus, just like a woman who bears children. But joy comes when a child comes into the world. And even greater joy came to the disciples who saw again their resurrected Lord. And no one would be able to take that joy away from them.

But Jesus alludes to something more here, too: the day He would leave them and return to His Father. We call that His ascension. Then they would no longer see Him as they would during the forty days after His resurrection. Yet even this separation would be for only a while; then the disciples would be able to see Him forever.

But for us the “little while” is something different; it is the time until Jesus’ second coming. It might seem strange to us to call it “a little while,” since now it’s been nearly two thousand years. But if we could imagine “a little while” by God’s standard of measuring, it fits. It is a little while when compared to the time that’s past since creation. And of course it’s an infinitely small amount of time in comparison with everything that awaits us in eternity. It’s also “a little while” for each of us as individuals – it’s only a matter of years, or several decades at most, until we meet Jesus face-to-face as heirs of His kingdom. And should our Lord not tarry in His return, it will be even less time.

But until that time, during this “little while,” we have to contend with the devil, the world, and our flesh. No one is exempt. And there’s 2 common and disastrous mistakes we make when we imagine that the “little while” until we see Jesus again is not a little while; that it’s a long way off: Mistake number 1 – It’s no little while – in fact, we have plenty of time to fix all “that stuff about God” later. Cowardly and indifferent we say, “Yeah, yeah, I’ll repent. I’ll apologize when the time is right. I’ll have that hard conversation when I get around to it.” Did not Jesus say in the parable of rich fool, the one who had smugly counted on his many years of happiness to come, “Fool! This very night your soul is required of you ...”?

The second mistake we make in regard “a little while” being a long way off is that

of despair. It's truly human and understandable to feel that times of difficulty and suffering last a long time. Time goes very slowly when we suffer. The persistent pain. The broken relationships that will not heal. We start to believe that suffering is our eternal reality.

Job knew this better than anyone: "... I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, 'When will I arise?' But the night is long and I am filled with tossing till the dawn." David says in Psalm 6: "I am weary with my groaning, all the night make I my bed to swim, I water my couch with my tears." God's faithful people speak forth their sorrows and they've become a part of God's Word. Yet the apostle Paul says that our affliction is momentary, truly "a little while." How can he say this? Because he sees suffering in light of the big picture: "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison."

Our God, He knows how long the sleepless nights can be. He endured them. But more than that. Jesus suffered the pain of deep physical torment on a cross for 3 hours. He suffered the pain of a broken relationship with God during that same time. But our Lord had eyes to see the light of eternity. He rose in glory for you. Now we also have eyes to see eternity. We can even understand that suffering is but for a moment in comparison with what lasts forever. Our past and present suffering will become a blur, a surreal dream. Everything that happens in this temporal life has an end. But the Resurrected Christ remains the same and His years have no end! You are joined to Him in Holy Baptism and your years will have no end!

So what? At some point you've endured hardship and suffering. Maybe you're even in the midst of it now. Maybe Christ is dead and buried to you. It seems He's still in the tomb. But He will rise again from the dead. He has hidden Himself for a little while, but He will come forth again. In your worst hardship take comfort in this verse: "On the third day He will rise again from the dead," or better yet, [Jesus said], "I am the Resurrection and the Life ... everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

Dear Christian! Let the devil, the world, and your flesh storm and rage! Let them do their worst! Let the winds rush and roar! Let the waves crash and soar! They can do no more than God permits. Whether our time is a little while or long, we only die once. But whether we live or we die, we are the Lord's. And we live eternally. So Suffer. Endure. Let the storm pass. It cannot last. It will end. But your life in Christ never will. In Jesus a little while of suffering gives way to eternal joy, and no one can take that joy away from you! Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠

This sermon was taken largely from the Bishop Bo Giertz in "To Live with Christ" (Concordia Publishing House) and Johann Spangenberg's "The Christian Year of Grace" (Concordia Publishing House) both for the appointed Gospel of the day.