

## Sermon for Easter IV – John 16:16-22

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

“A little while.” We’ve heard that before. “A little while” started back in middle of March. And it’s still a little while and we’re now into May. There may be a light at the end of the tunnel, but the recovery time is dragging on longer than anyone anticipated, isn’t it? Fear was real when all this began, and there is fear that still lingers. But now, in addition, there’s this collective agitation with the whole thing. When “a little while” turns into weeks and months, being antsy turns into being downright irritable and sometimes worse. When “a little while” is no longer so little, we are anxious, frustrated, and worried. What are we to do?

Our Lord tells us in today’s Gospel. In fact, the phrase “a little while” comes up seven times in this reading and it relates directly to suffering. Sorrow lasts a little while. But a little while seems like an eternity when you’re in the midst of it. Our perspective keeps us from seeing the whole picture. Our worries turn us inward. This generally increases our worries. Our Lord would have us look outside of ourselves, our problems, our worries and our sins and look to Him. For in Him is the only place where the answer to our worries can be found.

“Most assuredly I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice.” The Scriptures teach us that the Christian life is not a life of constant joy. As Christians, we must bear the crosses that God sends. We suffer. We are misunderstood and misrepresented by the world around us. “Where is your God!?,” they mock. “Is He powerless? Does He not care that a pandemic is ruining the world?” And in one respect, it is a rather valid question: Why is COVID-19 happening? Or maybe you’ve asked yourself before more generally, “Why do earthquakes happen?” “Why did tornadoes touch down in some places and not others?” “Why do tsunamis and hurricanes happen, killing many?” Our Lord addresses questions like these in Luke chapter 13. When asked about Galilean Jews murdered by Pontius Pilate and a tower falling in Siloam and killing eighteen people, Christ makes it clear that these were no worse sinners than anyone else. God was not exacting some type of specific punishment upon those sinners who died. Christ paid the price for all the sins of the world by His death on the cross. When hearing of these catastrophes, and especially the one in which we are currently living, He urges His disciples to repent. And this is the same for us today: repent and seek help in Christ, who is our only strength.

And we need God’s Son to rescue us. Our Lord tells His disciples, “I am going to the Father.” But He didn’t ascend to the Father until after He was affixed to the cross. His route back to heaven took Him through hell. For that is what He suffered on the cross. The only truly holy man who has ever lived was condemned for the sin of the world. He was lifted up to suffer. And in His being lifted up in the air, suspended on the cross, there is where He bore the wrath of God against us sinners; there is where He was forsaken in His suffering; there is where God defeated the devil; there is where Life swallowed up death forever; there is where Righteousness destroyed sin, and where joy drowned all our sorrow.

Call it a mystery. Call it a paradox. Call it foolishness. Where the deepest sorrow in the world was experienced is where we find our greatest joy in life. Where God’s Son drank the cup of sorrow, down to its dregs, is where our eternal joy was born.

Sorrow lasts a little while. Joy lasts forever. The Sundays in Easter of the church calendar have Latin names, since Latin is the language of the Church. Today is the fourth Sunday in Easter. The Latin name for today is Jubilate and it comes from this morning’s introit, “Shout for joy to God, all the earth! Sing the honor of His name; make His praise glorious.” Our joy is not dependent upon the circumstances of life in this world. It depends on Christ going to the Father. This world takes its turns for the better and for the worse. Material goods and good health come and go. And spiritually, it is the same way. Take the disciples for instance. They would miss seeing their Lord after He was arrested. They would turn their faces from His suffering. Then our Lord would restore them after His resurrection from the dead. Then He would ascend into heaven where they could see Him no more.

But what about us? We've never seen Him with our eyes. We've seen Him only by faith. And there are times when our faith becomes clouded and dull and confused. The sorrow of guilt, regret, bitterness, disappointment, self-blame, and doubt floods our souls. Where is Jesus? He appears to have hidden Himself from us. He appears to be so far away that He can't hear us and we can't hear Him. Yet He says, "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy."

Christ is not just talking to the original disciples here. He's talking to us. In case you hadn't noticed, we're not experiencing spiritual victory over sin, death, and the devil. In fact, we cave into the same sins time and time again, when we promised not to do so. Death makes us afraid, though we know we shouldn't fear it. The devil still has his way with us, and then mocks us for our acts of faithless denial and cowardly wavering. How sad are we?

Yet our sorrow will be turned into joy. That's what Christ promises. He who ascended to the Father not only took away our sins by His suffering and death, He also intercedes for us and pleads for us even as we struggle with our worries, even as we struggle with our troubles here in these times. He constantly visits our failures with His victory and this is what brings us joy.

Christ's cross is how He gained joy for us, for there is no true joy without the forgiveness of sins. There is no true joy without eternal life in Christ's name. True and lasting joy is impossible without Christ's cross. He goes to His Father's right hand only after the cross, which required of Him the deepest suffering and sorrow that any man ever faced. His cross is how He gained joy for us and our cross is where He brings this joy to us. In our helplessness, He comes. He forgives us. He forgives our sins, our doubts, our worries, our failures, and by forgiving us takes away the sorrow that holds us captive. What is hidden below Christ's cross and ours is ours by faith. What we now believe we will someday see.

Jesus compares this to a mother giving birth to a child. Giving birth is a wonderful honor as God has a woman be His participant in bringing a human life into the world. But the actual process of child birth is no fun. And a mother can't fully appreciate the joy of birth while she is going through the pain of delivery. Yet by the delivery, joy will come. She will see her little one. She will hold him in her arms. She will experience joy. As surely as she suffers the anguish, so surely she experiences the joy. And then the sorrow is forgotten. The birth of a child brings greater joy than the suffering that comes before.

In our times we see Christ hidden under His suffering and ours. We see Him, not with our eyes, but through faith. His words come to us in the midst of sorrow. And sorrow won't disappear as long as we live in these bodies in this world. But it's only for a little while. St. Paul tells us: "For I consider the sufferings of this present age not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

We don't know exactly what lies ahead, but we know that Christ Jesus holds us in His nail-marked hands. He will return to bring us joy we have never known. Thank God that we're not in charge and He is. The joy we would make for ourselves would be for just a little while. The joy awaiting us in heaven lasts forever.

We are indeed living in times that try our hearts and souls. The devil continues to do his darnedest to separate you from Christ and from your church. Pay him no heed amidst your frustrations and worries. Instead, focus your attention on the calm, steady voice of the Risen Savior and the promises He made on the night when He was betrayed: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy... So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

Bloodied and bruised for our sins, yet fresh from His grave, Christ kept His promise: He won the victory for us. Mid the uncertainties, mid the fears, mid the worries swirling all around us, our Lord Jesus remains the solid rock we can count on: there is nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from His love. Amen.

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