

“Time, Sorrow, and Joy”

John 16:16-22

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter 2022; May 8, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

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It was the night on which Jesus was betrayed. Jesus was having His last supper with His disciples, one of whom would betray Him, Judas. Jesus says to them: “For a little while you will see Me no longer, and again after a little while and you will see Me” (John 16:16). Then Jesus goes on to say: “Truly, truly I say to you that you will weep and lament, and the world will rejoice. You will be grieved, but your grief will be turned into joy” (John 16:20).

The disciples were perplexed by this. So they started asking each other what they thought Jesus was talking about. They were also perplexed about Jesus telling them earlier that He would be returning to the Father (John 16:17; John 13:33, 36).

Jesus was aware that they were talking about this and wanted to ask Him, so He took the initiative and answered them. So what does Jesus mean by this “for a little while they would not see Jesus and then after a little while and they would see Him?” We can talk about this “little while” in two ways.

The first way has to do with Jesus’ own death and resurrection. He was telling His disciples ahead of time what was going to happen. This is evident when Jesus says to them that “you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22 ESV).

And so Jesus was betrayed by Judas. Then the leaders of the people of Israel handed Jesus over to the Romans. The leaders convinced Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to deliver Jesus up to be crucified. The leaders stirred up the crowd into an irrational, emotional frenzy; into a mob. Pilate felt compelled to give in to their demands, just to keep the peace. Jesus suffered and was put to death.

The disciples saw it and were grieved. The world rejoiced. The world was represented here by the leaders of the people and the people who got stirred up by them against Jesus. The world put the good, the true, the right, the merciful to death. They put light and life to death. This is just like the world, isn’t it? They did this out of the passions of corrupted human flesh. These were the passions of the flesh that war against the soul (1 Peter 2:11) and just simply wanting their own way. So they set out to destroy the good. They rejoiced when they had gotten the victory and the good breathed His last breath. But the followers of Jesus were grieved.

Then on that third day when Jesus’ followers were locked up in the room, afraid, Jesus appeared to them. They saw Him. It was a little while from the events of Jesus’ betrayal and suffering and death. And now they saw Him alive once again. Their sorrow turned to joy. The world rejoiced in Jesus’ death—they thought they had gotten rid of Him. But now what Jesus said to His followers came true: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 ESV).

But what kind of a victory was this that Jesus won? I ask this because the National Hockey League’s Stanley cup playoffs are fully underway right now. The prize for the last team standing is to be crowned champion and to hoist the “Stanley cup.” Of course, to be crowned champion is the prize in every sport: basketball, world cup soccer, golf, baseball when October rolls around, football when January and February roll around. We could also talk about this in terms of cooking shows and cooking competitions. Teams lose at every round. This losing is grief for

those teams and their fans. There is joy for the team and their fans who win in the end.

But there is no “little while of not seeing and then seeing” for the teams and their fans that lose. There is no resurrection from this losing that can turn their grief into joy. And the victorious team does not share their victory with the losing teams.

For the victorious team, the mistakes, the errors, the bad plays, the losing one’s cool or nerve that cost the team, are all forgotten. These things are absolved in the sweet flood of victory. For the losing teams and their fans, these things seem to be amplified and become a haunting memory in the mind. There is no flood of absolution for the losing team. There is no answer of undoing, of resurrection, and the “behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5).

If there is a little while for the champions in sports, it is the little while of enjoying the victory until the next season starts, and the whole thing starts all over again. Repeating as champion is very difficult. And the time flies by so fast such that the heroes of those championship memories are caught up to by age and eventually must hang up the skates, the sneakers, or the cleats. Those victories are not everlasting.

But Jesus’ victory is a victory that He shares. It is a victory for all who despair of themselves and seize hope in Him. It is a victory that brings the flood of absolution to all who seek healing in Him. His victory is a victory that lasts forever. It is not subject to the “little while” of “until next season.” It is a victory that does not last forever in memory, of those good old days. It is a victory that lives forever in a faith and hope that transforms the soul, both the mind and emotion. It is a living reality in the victory shared with those who follow Him: “Your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22). This is the first thing Jesus’ saying about the “little while” can mean.

The second thing is that it can be taken to refer to Jesus’ coming again. We can see this when Jesus talks about going to the Father. He will go to the Father and not be seen—with the eyes. But He promises in this connection as well: “I will see you again.”

Notice He says that “I will see you.” He does not say first that “you will see me.” He says I will see you. His seeing us creates the circumstances in which we can say that we will see Him. Thus, this seeing Him is in His power. It is in His doing. It is in His accomplishing. It is in His making it come to pass. It is in His time.

Therefore, it will happen, because the world can do nothing to stop it, as it could not stop His rising from death to life. And it does not depend upon the strength of our faithfulness, which can often be feeble. It does not depend upon our power to win the victory over sin and death, which we cannot do. We need God’s help with that. I will see you again says Jesus. He saw them on the third day, and throughout the forty days thereafter. He is saying to us: “I will see you on that great and glorious Day.”

Oh, but Pastor. It has now been much longer than a little while since Jesus ascended to the Father and they saw Him no longer—not with the eyes. But has it really? Sometimes we think of time as taking so long. It can seem like this for children. “Oh, Christmas will never get here.” “Oh, the day of graduation from High School will never come.” But then when we look back we realize just how fast time has gone. Is a couple of thousands of years really that long a time?

How long do we think those three days were for the disciples? We could look at that by counting the number of ticks of the clock, the number of seconds and minutes and hours. In that respect, it was not really a very long time. On the other hand, it could have seemed like an eternity, because of the grief and the sorrow and the apparent triumph of evil over good. It could seem like an eternity when they were walking in the darkness and gloom. While the ticks of the clock kept ticking away, they were gathered together in fear and grief.

And then Jesus appeared among them. He showed them His hands, His side, His feet. “A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have,” He said to them (Luke 24:39). The agonizingly-long last couple of days became a little time, indeed.

Just how long is the time between the ascension of Jesus and His appearing again on this earth in glory? Let us think of it as a little while, no matter what the number of the ticks of the clock may be, lest our hearts and minds lose the awareness and conviction that we will see Him, and so allow the passions of the corrupted flesh to gain the upper hand. Lest we lose perspective and be overcome by grief over losses here.

But we need help from God in this “little time” between Jesus’ ascension and our seeing Him. This is because in this “little time” we can suffer the grief of losses here. And it always remains the case what Jesus said: “[I]n the world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). There is also a battle going on for us with the passions of human flesh corrupted by sin. We need God’s help in these things lest we lose faith and hope, and lose our way. We need comfort and strength from God.

Jesus promises such comfort and strength. This comfort and strength is the Holy Spirit. Jesus also talks about this in John chapter 16 (John 16:1-15), as well as in chapters 14 and 15. But we will talk about this next Sunday.

Today we give thanks that after a little while, the disciples did see Jesus again, and all was forgiven, and they wanted this forgiveness. In the light of this good news we walk now in the promise that Jesus will see us one day, and we will rejoice, even as we rejoice now that He lives, and lives for us here in His word and sacrament in the Spirit. He has overcome the world, and His joy and peace will triumph in the end. Thanks be to God. Amen.