

SORROW TO JOY

John 16:12-22

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Series C)

May 15, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 16, verses 12 through 22. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples about real joy, and where he must go to get it for us. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 16, beginning at verse 12, we read in Jesus' name.

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

¹⁶“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” ¹⁷So some of his disciples said to one another, “What is this that he says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me’; and, ‘because I am going to the Father’?” ¹⁸So they were saying, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We do not know what he is talking about.” ¹⁹Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, “Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, ‘A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me’? ²⁰Truly, 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. ²¹When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²²So 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.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Therefore, we have joy. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. He has entered into his joy. And he shares that joy with you, his disciples.

Joy is different than happiness. Or, at least, the kind of joy we're talking about today is different. Happy people do not necessarily have joy, and joyful people don't have to be happy all the time. Joy transcends our feelings. You can have joy even when you don't feel it. Joy is less subjective than happiness. It's more objective. That means it is not subject to how you feel. And it does not depend on your momentary circumstances. Now that doesn't mean that joy is completely independent of emotions. Sometimes we do feel joy. And when you do experience joy, it is much deeper and stronger than happiness. But joy can remain even when you're not experiencing it. It does not come and go. Happiness comes and goes. You can go from sad to

happy when you hear a funny joke. But that joke can also make you spill your coffee and you go right back to sad again. Happiness is just a feeling.

But joy is grounded in something. You don't just have joy for no reason. When you have joy, you have joy in something. In this way, joy is connected to hope. You hope in something outside of yourself, and the success of that thing gives you joy. The Christian's joy is in Jesus Christ, particularly, that he died and rose again. And this is why our joy does not come and go. It is grounded in something that does not change. Jesus died, Jesus is risen, and Jesus is alive forever. His resurrection cannot be undone or taken away. Therefore, our joy cannot be taken from us. Even when our hearts are distracted by the momentary circumstances of this world, our joy is in Jesus, so it remains. And those momentary circumstances might even deserve our attention. When someone God has given us to love experiences illness, death, or some other pain, we have sorrow. And this is right. We should share in the grief of those we love. But our joy in Jesus still remains. And that joy can carry us through the sorrow and even give meaning to the sorrow.

The joy of Jesus never ends, even when we go through sorrow.

In this gospel lesson, Jesus promises this kind of joy to his disciples. He spoke these words on the evening before his crucifixion. One of his disciples had already left to betray him (13:30). Jesus' death was now imminent. So Jesus said to the eleven who remained, **"A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while and you will see me"** (16:16).

This is a critical statement in this text. Whenever something is repeated, that's a clue to us that it's important. And this gets repeated two more times as the disciples try to figure out what in the world Jesus is talking about. They connected this statement with another thing Jesus had said to them that night: that he is going to the Father (14:12). So Jesus is going away, and he is going to the Father, but it won't be long. So what is Jesus talking about? The disciples were confused. I suppose they were confused because, how is he going to go to the Father? And, if it's only going to be a little while, why would they be so sad that they weep and lament? They are confused.

And we might still be confused about it. There are two events that come to mind that Jesus might be speaking of. Is he talking about his death and resurrection? Is that the **"Little while"** he is talking about? Or is he talking about his ascension forty days later and his return on the Last Day? Since we're getting further along in the Easter season and closer to Ascension Day, we might think Jesus is talking about that. Maybe that's why this text is appointed for today.

People have wondered about this, and even spilt ink over it, but the answer is really quite simple. Jesus is talking about his death and resurrection. And this is obvious for two basic reasons.

First, Jesus spoke these words on the evening before his crucifixion. The timing is important. For a few days the disciples would not see Jesus. They would weep and lament, because he was dead, and they thought he was gone for good. But in just a few days Jesus would rise from the dead, and they would see him again. After this they had a joy that no one could ever take away.

Second, this doesn't really fit Jesus' ascension, because, even though they did not see Jesus any longer with their eyes, they did not weep and lament when Jesus ascended into heaven. In fact, **"They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy"** (Luke 24:52). They were not sad when Jesus ascended into heaven. The exact opposite was true. They were quite joyful.

Sometimes we get thrown off by Jesus' statement that he is going to the Father. This is the part that makes it seem like he's talking about his ascension. But Jesus also went to the Father after his crucifixion. The letter to the Hebrews talks about this. He appeared before the Father to

offer his blood as the once for all sacrifice for sin (Heb. 9:12). We don't think about this event as much. When we think about the time between Jesus' death and his resurrection, we usually just think about his descent into hell. I suppose that's because we confess it in the creed, so we're more familiar with that event. But neither the creed, nor Scripture, tell us how long Jesus spent in hell. It didn't have to be the entire time. And, in fact, it could not have been the entire time, because Jesus also went to the Father to present his blood as the once for all sacrifice for sin. Then, having secured our redemption, he returns to his disciples. He appears to them on the evening of his resurrection and bestows the Holy Spirit upon them (John 20:22). That's the return that gives them joy.

So Jesus is talking about going away to the Father, by way of the cross, to secure our eternal redemption. This is how he prepares a place in his Father's house for us (14:2). And this is how he now sends the Holy Spirit to us. In order for us to receive the Holy Spirit without being destroyed by God's holiness, we must first be cleansed from our sins. Every benefit we have as Christians is a direct result of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

So the disciples did not understand at the time, but in just a few days they would. If Jesus is only going to be gone for a little while, why would they weep and lament? You don't weep and lament when someone goes away for just a little while. It's like when your mom says she's going to the grocery store. You don't weep and lament. You just say, "Buy ice cream." And you don't worry, because she will be back soon. So why would the disciples weep and lament when Jesus goes away? It's because his brief departure looks a lot more permanent. He departs through the cross. He actually dies. This, for all the world, looks permanent.

The world thinks they have killed off the Christ, so the world rejoices. The disciples think they have lost their God and Christ, so they weep and lament. But on the third day their sorrow is turned to joy. Jesus rises from the dead with forgiveness and life for all who believe in him. Never will he die again.

Jesus compares this to a mother giving birth. And this is a really brilliant analogy. "When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow, because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world" (16:21). When the anguish is over, and the child is born, there is incredible joy. But notice this: the mother isn't happy just because the pain is over. I'm sure she's happy that the pain has subsided, but there is much more to rejoice over. She is filled with joy because a child is born! It's not just that the pain subsided. Who cares about the pain anymore? She rejoices because the pain has resulted in something marvelous. Her suffering gives way to life. It's not just life as usual anymore. It is much better.

Jesus compares this to what the disciples will go through with his death and resurrection. For a few days their God and Christ is dead. This is the worst. They have deep sorrow, and it seems that nothing can make it better. But then Jesus appears, and they are filled with joy. And their joy is about much more than the mere fact that he's not dead anymore. The greatest joy is in what his death accomplished. They rejoice, and we rejoice, because the greatest pain has resulted in the greatest good. Just like that newborn baby, they rejoice because something new, something better, is here. It's not just about Jesus not being dead anymore. It's about what his death accomplished. It's not just life as usual anymore. It is much better. His death has made atonement for our sins. It has granted new life, eternal life.

And, because Jesus' blood cleanses us from all sins, he now sends his Holy Spirit upon us. The Holy Spirit is our teacher. He takes what is Christ's and declares it to us. For the apostles, this meant bringing to their remembrance what Jesus had taught them and inspiring them to write

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their portions of the Scriptures. For us, it means that the Holy Spirit takes those very same Scriptures, and he teaches them to us, not merely to our minds, but also to our hearts. The Holy Spirit teaches us the reason for our joy.

So that's the joy we have through Jesus' resurrection. This is an immovable joy. It cannot be displaced by the momentary distractions of life. It cannot be overruled by our feelings. We may go through times of deep sorrow. Or we may just go through seasons of numbness. This joy remains, and we look forward to the day when we will finally experience its fullness.

For now, we experience it in part. We experience it more when we meditate on the Word of God, especially concerning forgiveness and salvation in Jesus. We experience this joy when we confess our sin and receive forgiveness. This is why we have confession and absolution every Sunday. It might seem that if we want to have a joyful service, we should leave out all the stuff about how miserable and rotten we are. But that's not true. Sometimes the greatest joy comes out of sorrow. And confession and absolution is definitely one of those "sometimes." When we confess our sin, we enter into sorrow, and that sorrow is turned to joy at the absolution. And this is part of why we take a moment of silence to reflect on our sin. When we confess our sins together, we should actually think of specific sins, even if we don't name them out loud. And when we hear God's Word of forgiveness, we should think of those same specific sins. Those sins, along with many others, are truly forgiven. You could just ignore your sin. You could try to just forget about it and move on. I urge you not to do this. For one thing, you would be despising repentance, and that would leave you in a precarious position with God. But you would also be cutting yourself off from the experience of real joy. Forgiveness doesn't mean much if you don't know what you're being forgiven of. The greatest joy comes out of sorrow.

For Jesus, too, his joy comes out of the deepest sorrow. The joy of Jesus' resurrection is not simply that he's alive. If that's all we need, then he could have just not died. And if all Jesus wanted was to not be dead, he could have avoided the cross. But Jesus desired more than simply not being dead. He desired to bring you out of death with him. This is his greatest joy. It's not the fact that he's alive, although I'm sure he's happy about that. Jesus' greatest joy is that his resurrection gives life to you. And so the cause of his joy is not simply that he is alive. It's that he is alive again. The only thing better than a living Jesus, is a Jesus who once was dead and is alive again. Having passed through the greatest possible sorrow, he earned forgiveness and life for you. This is the greatest possible joy. And it is Jesus' great joy to give this joy to you. Our sorrow became his sorrow, and his joy has become our joy. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.