

Third Sunday of Easter; April 23, 2023
+ John 16:16-23a +
“Sorrow in the World; Joy in Jesus”

“In a little while you are not going to see me anymore, and again in a little while you will see me, because I am going away to the Father.”

Therefore some of his disciples asked one another, “What does he mean when he tells us, ‘In a little while you are not going to see me, and again in a little while you will see me’ and ‘Because I am going away to the Father’?” So they kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he’s saying.”

Jesus knew they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, “Are you trying to determine with one another what I meant by saying ‘In a little while you are not going to see, and again in a little while you will see’? Amen, Amen, I tell you: You will weep and wail, but the world will rejoice. You will become sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy. A woman giving birth has pain, because her time has come. But when she has delivered the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, because of her joy that a person has been born into the world.

“So you have sorrow now. But I will see you again. Your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you. In that day you will not ask me anything.”

In the season of Lent, there was a Sunday called, “Rejoice!” If you’re going to have a Sunday in Lent called, “Rejoice!”, you better have one in Easter, too. But Easter joy is different. This is “Make a Joyful Noise,” or “Sound your joy” Sunday. Because this Sunday Jesus answers for us:

What does it mean if Jesus truly rose from the dead, and lives today, and will never die again? How does it affect things? How does it affect you? We’ve talked about some of the implications over the last few weeks. If Jesus rose from the dead, then death is truly conquered. Sin is truly atoned for. Fear itself has become unnecessary. Today our lessons point us to yet another implication of Easter, that sorrow is also tempered and temporary and will soon be replaced by endless joy. This not only gives us joy, but joy worth sounding off about.

Jesus speaks the words of today’s Gospel on the night before he dies. The eleven disciples’ confusion is understandable on Maundy Thursday evening. Many astonishing things have happened already that night. Jesus has washed their feet. Judas’ betrayal has been foretold and fulfilled. A new Supper of the body and blood of Jesus has been instituted. Jesus has been cramming many teachings into this last time they will have together before he goes to his cross.

Some things he speaks clearly, other things cryptically. It is one of those cryptic sayings that leaves the disciples wondering: **“In a little while, you are not going to see me anymore, and again in a little while you will see me.”**

There is a very literal, near-term sense to those words. In a little while, less than 24 hours, Jesus will be dead and buried, out of sight and seemingly gone forever. In another little while, some 48 hours after he is buried, they will all see him again, except for Thomas. And Jesus' words also have a long-term sense. Because then, 40 days later, he will ascend into heaven and go to the Father, at whose right hand he will sit and rule over all things for the benefit of the Church until he returns again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

In the near-term of the next few days, the disciples will weep and mourn and fill with sorrow for a little while, while the world rejoices to have Jesus out of the way. But then the disciples will rejoice when they see the Lord. And the world will lose some of its own joy, because, while the world still believes Jesus to be dead, it soon learned that it would have to keep dealing with these pesky Christians who believe he is alive and so refuse to bow before the world and its demands that we should be like them.

Now, you and I, we will never experience what the apostles did, getting to see on this earth the Lord risen from the dead. But then, we will also never experience what they experienced, a time when, even a little while, our Lord Jesus is dead.

It's true. We don't see Jesus. He has risen and gone to the Father. He has removed his visible presence from us for a little while, for our relatively short lives on earth, for the "little" time between his ascension and his coming at the end of the age. The unbelieving world rejoices not to see him, because it allows people to do what they want, believe what they want, and rush into every form of perversion and wickedness, because they think Jesus is either dead or a fictional character who doesn't exist. The only thing that gets in the world's way are those nagging Christians, at least the ones who remain faithful to the Word of Christ, who keep claiming to have not "a" truth or "our" truth, but *the* truth, who keep preaching about sin and divine judgment and hell, and about God's earnest desire that all people escape their just condemnation, but only through repentance and faith in Christ Jesus.

For our part, we Christians also have plenty of sorrow during this time of not seeing Jesus, because in his visible absence we're forced to deal with our own doubts and uncertainties, to struggle against our own sin, and to put up with the unbelieving world's hatred and malice. We would all like to see Jesus now and have him blast all the bad stuff away, to have Him restore goodness and order to the world, to wipe away every tear from our eyes immediately. But that is not what's best, either for the world for which God is waiting with such abundance patience to repent, or for us. And God knows it.

But even now he does reveal himself to us in his Word, which is a living and active thing, filled with the working of his Holy Spirit. He shows himself to us in the Gospels crucified, dead, and buried, but then alive again. And he works in us by his Spirit so that we believe it and know that he lives. And if he lives, then your minister's absolution has divine authority behind it, and the sacraments have real and living power to forgive your sins and strengthen this saving faith in your heart. If he lives, then all our sorrow and grief is tempered. It's like the sorrow of a woman in labor; it's tempered by the knowledge that the pain will have an end, and in the end, it will all have been more than worth it, because a child will be born, and joy will truly begin.

I have visited quite a few new parents and babies in the hospital and have seen this many times. One mother and father had just added their third bundle of joy when I saw them. And they were smiling with joy. The night before they had not been smiling. She was in pain, and so was he. And he showed me proof.

