

Rev. Danny Mackey
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 22, 2018
John 16:11-16
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] Alleluia!

“You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.”

The disciples had settled down to a nice Passover celebration that Thursday night, and Jesus—as was His usual custom—taught them. He told them about the Holy Spirit’s coming. He gave them a new commandment to love one another. He promised them mansions in heaven. But the lesson went dark. Jesus said He’d betrayed by one of them, that Peter would deny Him, and that they would be hated and persecuted by the world. And now—now Jesus’ talking about going away and that they’ll have sorrow and suffering. It’s not a happy occasion. This Passover has a very sour note. What happened to the parade just days earlier? Remember, when they were waving palm branches and singing hosannas, Jesus? Don’t leave us, Jesus! Please, don’t leave us!

Jesus says the same thing to us. Things will go badly. You will suffer. You will sorrow. In fact, circumstances and situations in your life will be so dour that, at times, you won’t be able to see Jesus in any of it. He’ll seem so very far away from you—as if He’s turned His back on you, abandoned you, left you... forever and ever. You won’t be the first to feel this way. Many of God’s faithful people have. The psalmists cry out, “Lord, turn not Your face from me!” and “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” The apostles wept and lamented when they laid Jesus’ dead body in the tomb. For the Christian, the worst sorrow comes from not seeing Christ, from being uncertain of His grace and love and peace and mercy for them.

Is that what you’re most afraid of? Are you afraid of losing God more than you’re afraid of anything else? If God turned away from you, would you even notice—or are you so wrapped up in yourself and this world and its stuff? Is having God’s grace and living according to His will your greatest treasure? Or is it something else? A child? A spouse, a boyfriend or girlfriend? A car or house? A job? Adoration from your peers? Mammon, money, stuff? Is it in these things that you find joy, happiness, pleasure? Are these what you’re afraid of losing more than you’re afraid of losing God? Not the disciples.

The disciples sound a bit confused, “What does he mean by ‘a little while [and you will not see me]’?” I can’t help but think that the disciples were doing more than just scratching their heads. Rather, I think they were freaking out! The evening had been an emotional rollercoaster for them—like they’d been knocked and jerked about from one emotional extreme to another. They didn’t know what to think or to feel. Jesus had upset them, truly.

“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 to joy.”

For a little while they didn’t see Jesus. He had been handed over to lawless men, executed for crimes He didn’t commit, crucified on a cross. They took His body and laid it in the tomb and rolled a large stone in front of it, sealing Him away. The Sanhedrin posted a guard. He was gone. It was over. They wept and lamented, while their enemies rejoiced.

But then the women came back, announcing the tomb was empty! Mary Magdalene said she saw Him, touched Him, hugged Him! Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it empty that morning, and a little later that day He appeared to them in the Upper Room. Their sorrow was turned to joy! They had Jesus once more, and their joy would not be taken from them again!

That’s what Jesus is talking about in our lesson; He’s talking about His death, burial, and resurrection. He would take a little three-day nap in the tomb and then come and see them again. The disciples—and all Christians—have joy because they see Christ and are certain of the nearness of His grace. He promises, “Lo, I will be with you always, even to the very end of the age.” He is named Immanuel, which means, God with us. His promises of grace and mercy and love and peace are certain.

Now, sorrows still struck the disciples. They were hated by the world, persecuted, murdered. James was killed by the sword at Herod’s command, the very first of the apostles martyred. Peter would be crucified upside down. Paul, who had once hunted down and rounded up Christians to be killed, was himself beheaded. In fact, the only apostle not to be martyred was John. He did get exiled to the island of Patmos, however. Despite their worldly sorrows, still they had divine joy. How else do you think they faced being hunted down and murdered? Luther goes so far to say that the Christian has joy in defiance against the sorrows of this world.

It's not that we won't get down. It's not that we won't suffer. But does the the worldly suffering we experience mean that God has abandoned, left, turned His back on us? Certainly not! We suffer because we bring it upon ourselves, or another attacks and wounds us, or simply because this world is caught of the throws of suffering. We will suffer. But we have Jesus' promise that our suffering and sorrow will only be for a "little while." Jesus sees His disciples through their terrible yet brief suffering. And that suffering will be overcome just as He overcame death and the grave in His resurrection on Easter morning!

Oh, blessed are we who are kept with Christ. He is our certainty, our hope, and our joy! His goal for us is peace and joy in both time and eternity. While we reside on earth, our weak hearts and the distress of our souls are met by His invitation and promise of blessing: "Come to Me, you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest for your souls." He promises that our present sufferings do not compare to the glories that await us—an eternal glory, an eternal peace, an eternal comfort. Jesus our glory, peace, comfort, love, and joy. No one, He declares, will take your joy—will take Me—from you.

For that we offer joyful and godly praise, even amidst our worldly sorrows, because our sorrows are only "a little while," but Jesus is forever.

In His name.

He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] Alleluia!