

John 16:16-22 (Jubilate)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
May 8, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

These last few weeks of the Easter season are all about preparing us for the upcoming feasts of Ascension and Pentecost. We shift our focus from what Jesus “began to do and teach,” as St. Luke puts it (Acts 1:1), to what He continues to do and teach through His Church in the world. So our Gospel readings take us back in time to our LORD’s Upper Room discourse, where Jesus instructs His disciples, and us, on what is to come after His death and resurrection. On the night He was betrayed, Jesus says to His disciples in the Upper Room: “A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me.” Jesus explains what He means: “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.” Here Jesus is speaking about His death and resurrection, but He’s also speaking about His Ascension to the right hand of the Father and future return to judge the living and the dead. Jesus is speaking about His resurrection and return, but He is also showing us the pattern of the Christian life. On this side of eternity, we are constantly going from sorrow to joy and joy to sorrow and back again. Our feelings and our situation are always changing, but the LORD and His steadfast love for us always remain the same, despite what we might think or feel at the moment.

“A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me.” Jesus is first and foremost speaking about His death and resurrection. When Jesus said these words on the night He was betrayed, Judas had already left the upper room. He was on his way with a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and Pharisees to betray Jesus and hand Him over to death. In just a little while, the Apostles would not see Jesus any longer.

The LORD would visibly be removed from this life, arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, judged before Herod and Pontius Pilate, crucified on the cross, and buried in the tomb. There, a large stone hid our LORD's body from sight. Jesus's words on the night He was betrayed were immediately fulfilled: "A little while, and you will see me no longer."

But Jesus quickly added: "and again a little while, and you will see me." Our LORD was only three days in the belly of the earth, three days hidden from sight in the rocky tomb. For three days the disciples remained behind locked doors in the upper room, afraid of what would happen to them. For a little while, they no longer had the LORD's physical presence to guide them, but then again a little while, and they saw the LORD. Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Peter, John, the other disciples, the five hundred (1 Cor 15:6)---all witnessed the fulfillment of what Jesus said: "A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me." Jesus went away for a little while when He was crucified and buried. His followers no longer saw Him. They wept and lamented, they were sorrowful, but their sorrow was turned into joy when they realized Jesus had, in fact, risen from the dead. The resurrected LORD walked among His followers and showed Himself to the people for another forty days.

And then our LORD again departed visibly from the earth. Jesus could well have said once more: "A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me." He had already told Mary Magdalene: "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20:17). After He ascended to the right hand of God, the angels said: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). That is, Jesus will return visibly, this time in the sight of all people, with a cry of

command, with the sound of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God (1 Thess 4:16). The disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Luke 24:52). For a little while they would no longer see the LORD, but they had His promise: “a little while and you will see me.” They could rejoice knowing Jesus would return! As Jesus said in the Upper room: “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.”

The joy of Easter, true Christian joy, persists even in the midst of sorrow. The life of the Church after Christ’s resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven is not a life of happiness and contentment in an earthly sense. The apostles were beaten and charged not to speak in the name of Jesus, yet they rejoiced “that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name [of Christ]” (Acts 5:40-41). All of the apostles, except one, suffered death on account of Christ. And yet St. Paul could say: “In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy” (2 Cor 7:4). The early Christians were persecuted horribly, tortured, and executed for their faith. Throughout the centuries the true Church has met with resistance and bloodshed on every side. Yet there is Christian joy in the midst of suffering. In 1 Peter, the Apostle tells us that we rejoice in our faith, even though we are “grieved by various trials for a little while.” The disciples don’t see Jesus for a little while, yet they rejoice knowing that in a little while they will see Him again.

“A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me” is not just about our LORD’s death and resurrection, or the life of the Church from Christ’s Ascension into Heaven until He returns on Judgment Day. “A little while, and you will see me no longer, and again a little while, and you will see me” is also the pattern of the Christian’s life right here and right now. When we experience suffering it can feel like an eternity. We can feel like Jesus has left us, that He has gone away for more than a little while, more like forever.

Sometimes in our suffering we forget all the good things God has done and promises to do for us. We focus only on the turbulent world around us, or the misfortune in our lives. We lose any sense that God is with us. We lose sight of Christ for a little while and feel like He's not there, like He's far away from us and from our problems, unconcerned about our daily struggles and the struggles of those around us.

But then there are times where the tables seem to turn, moments where the sun peeks through the storm clouds, or the storm passes entirely and the day is bright again. The crosses we bear are for but a little while. Whereas before it felt like God turned His face away from us and our problems, now we regain strength and resolve. Our sorrow turns into joy. We might not see Christ for a little while, we might feel like He's not here with us, but Jesus sees us and He promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age. Jesus is with us in our daily trials and suffering, even if it doesn't feel like it at the moment. "A little while and you will not see me" is followed soon after with: "and again a little while you will see me." Our sorrow is soon turned to joy and our weeping into rejoicing when we are reminded that our LORD has not left us. He remains active in the world in an invisible way, coming to us in His Word and Sacraments, until He returns again on the final day in glory.

The reason Jesus tells us that in a little while we will see Him no longer and again in a little while we will see Him is to sustain us in the meantime, to give us hope. As He says earlier: "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away" (John 16:1). If someone sees light at the end of the tunnel, the assurance that this too, will pass, there is renewed vigor to keep fighting. How often people say: "I could have held out if I knew it was only for a short time." Hope can go a long way in keeping a person motivated for the struggle at hand. The stress of conflict and the need for endurance will not last forever. As St. Paul reminds us: "Now hope that

is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rm 8:24-25). Jesus promises that after a little while our sorrow will turn into joy and that ultimately no one will take that joy from us. The constant back and forth between sorrow and joy will continue until the end of your life, but in the end, the joy of the resurrection will triumph. Your suffering is only temporary; your joy is eternal. Again from St. Paul: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rm 8:19).

So when you’re in the midst of suffering and the cross, when life is not going the way you expect and you feel surrounded by enemies on every side, when it seems like your LORD has abandoned you, remember the words of Jesus: “A little while and you will see me no longer.” Jesus told His disciples what would happen. Jesus tells us what will happen. He warns us that life will not be easy, that it will seem as though He is far away. But hold still and wait for the second part of the verse: “and again a little while and you will see me.” Jesus has not forsaken you; He has merely removed His visible presence that He might prepare a place for you in eternity (John 14:3). In the meantime, Jesus will continue making His presence known to you in His Word and Sacraments. Here, through these Means, Jesus is with you always, to the end of the age, until you see with your own eyes the one you trust in even now: our LORD Jesus Christ. And then, with the disciples and the whole Church throughout the ages, your temporal sorrow will turn into eternal joy. In the name of Jesus, Amen.