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The Gospel of John
XLVII. No One Will Take Your Joy
John 16:16-24

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“A little while,” says Jesus, *“and you will see me no more; and again a little while, and you will see me.”* As with so many other things Jesus has said to them in His farewell address at the Last Supper, the disciples are confused about what in the world Jesus is talking about. They turn to one another whispering, *“What is He talking about?”* Jesus is, of course, talking about what that night, and the next three days, are about to bring. The “little while” Jesus is talking about is the time between His crucifixion and His resurrection:

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 into joy . . . I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

And that is exactly what happens in the “little while” between Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus is arrested, tried, crucified, and buried – and the disciples are filled with sorrow while the religious leaders rejoice. But on Easter morning, Jesus rises from the dead and greets His disciples – and they are overwhelmed with joy. Joy that Jesus who was dead is now alive again. Joy that everything Jesus had said to them has now been proven to be true. A joy that comes from now knowing, without a doubt, that Jesus really is the Son of God, the Messiah – and that the Kingdom of God really is at hand. A joy that truly will not, and was not, ever taken away from them. For example, here’s John writing in the opening of his first letter:

From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in—we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we’re telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us.

We saw it, we heard it, and now we’re telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Our motive for writing is simply this: We want you to enjoy this, too. Your joy will double our joy!¹

And that joy John expresses in his letter points us to a second understanding of Jesus’ phrase “a little while” – a second understanding which the earliest Christians were quick to seize

upon: that the “little while” between sorrow and joy that first applied to the first disciples for the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, also applied now to all the disciples who were yet to come. That “a little while” referred not just to the first disciples and that time between Jesus’ death and resurrection, but also applied to the time between Jesus’ ascension into heaven and His coming again in glory at the end of time – something, in other words, which applies to all disciples of Christ, including us today. That we, this very morning, are living in the “little while” between Jesus’ time on earth and His return to earth in glory. And, therefore, that Jesus is also speaking to us in our day when He says to us that our *“sorrow will be turned to joy.”* When He says to us, *“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.”*

But even more than that, what Jesus is assuring us in this “little while” in which we now live, even as we now await His return, is that we can and may and shall live already in an “anticipatory” joy. By faith in Him, we can live now in joy ahead of time – ahead of His return in glory. Because we, like the first disciples, live now in the assurance of everything that was confirmed at the end of that first “little while” of His crucifixion and resurrection: that Jesus really is the Son of God, the Messiah; that everything He said really is the Truth; and that the Kingdom of God really is coming. We live now in this “little while” between His ascension and His return in glory with the full assurance of that first “little while” – the full assurance that nothing can now separate us from the love of God; that nothing can now alter or hinder His promise that all things will in the end be brought round to good for us and for all creation; and that nothing in this “little while” can ever steal from us the joy of knowing that our lives here and now are precious in the eyes of God, and shall be raised up from the dead at the end of our days to live with Him in joy forever.

Our life now is like that of a woman giving birth – the example Jesus Himself uses – in that it may be difficult at times, but we can bear the difficulty because we know the joy which is about to be born. You and I know already, live already, in the anticipatory joy of the Kingdom which is coming, which shall be fully born on earth when Jesus returns. *“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.”*

But let us clarify two important things, even as we relish that promise and that truth. First, as Jesus says, *“You will have sorrow now.”* Meaning that as we live in this “little while” between His ascension and His return, we Christians are not exempt from the ordinary trials and travails of human life. The promise of Jesus, here and elsewhere, is not that bad things, hard things, won’t happen to His disciples – but that He will always bring us through those bad things, those hard things. He will enter into them with us through His Holy Spirit, He will sustain us along the way, and He will always deliver us – our sorrows will never be permitted the final word over our lives. Our sorrows will never be allowed to take from us our joy.

Timothy Keller, who was the founder and long-time pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and the author of many wonderful books on the Christian faith and life, put this in a wonderful way in a sermon he preached not long before 9/11. He said, *“God doesn’t guarantee a life free of suffering, but he gives us a suffering Lord who understands and undoes our aloneness in the midst of suffering.”*² I think that is so perfectly said: *“A suffering Lord who understands and undoes our aloneness in the midst of suffering.”* Jesus doesn’t promise us that

we won't have sorrow and suffering in this "little while" in which we live. But He does promise us that He will be with us in our sorrow and suffering, and that He will sustain us and bring us safely through. He promises that the sorrow and suffering will not be the last word – just as His death on the cross was not the last word. But that there will be for us, always, a resurrection to new life following the sorrow and the suffering. *"You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn to joy"* – His promise.

And second, we should clarify what exactly is meant by joy. I think we've already hinted at it, but let's say it plainly. Joy is not the same thing as happiness – even though happiness often accompanies joy, as when the disciples first laid eyes on their risen Lord. But joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is an emotion, which comes and goes in us in response to whatever is happening to us in any given moment. It is contingent upon our circumstances, both inwardly and outwardly.

For example, early Wednesday morning, I got to see the first pictures of our newborn niece, Rachel – who was born to Lindsay, my brother's first-born child. And looking at those pictures, celebrating that birth, I was happy – very, very happy. But then I tried to forward those pictures from my phone to Anne's phone so that she could see them when she got up. I found this to be a most difficult, frustrating, and – not having a twelve-year-old in the house who could do it for me in two seconds – nearly impossible task. And I was unhappy – very, very unhappy. But then I got to the church office and Jonene greeted me with the news that someone had brought the church staff two dozen Krispy Kreme doughnuts fresh from the "Hot Now" sign in the Krispy Kreme store window. And I was happy – very, very happy – once again. But that's how it is with happiness – it comes and goes depending on what's coming and going in our lives at any given moment.

Joy is different. Joy is not an emotion. Joy is independent of whatever is going on in our lives at any given moment. In fact, joy is something we can possess no matter what is going on in our lives. We can be joyful even when we're sad. We can be joyful even when we're glad. We can be joyful in every moment – because joy is not an emotion, it is a condition of our souls.

Joy is an assurance, an understanding, an outlook which dwells deep down at the very core of who we are and how we understand our lives. Joy is knowing that because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead – in other words, defeated our greatest enemy – that we, then, don't have to be afraid of death anymore. And if we don't have to be afraid of death anymore, then we also don't have to be afraid of anything anymore – because death is the worst thing that can happen to us, and if Jesus has already defeated death, then we can rest ourselves in the assurance that no matter what we are going through or what lies ahead, Jesus is stronger than whatever it might be. It won't be able to defeat Jesus – and therefore it won't be able to defeat us, who dwell in the shadow of His wings. Whatever bad thing we are going through or will go through, it won't be able to separate us from His love for us, and it won't be allowed to diminish or destroy God's plan for our lives.

And that knowledge, that assurance, that promise from our Savior living deep in our souls – that is what joy is. Joy is knowing that our lives are founded on the rock of God's love for us, and that nothing is bigger or better than that. Joy is knowing, as Jesus says at the end of our

passage, that all we need do is turn to our Heavenly Father in prayer – and we will find grace help in time of need. Joy is living our lives out of the certainty that, as Moses put it, *“The eternal God is our refuge, and beneath us always are the everlasting arms.”*³ And no one, as Jesus says, no one can ever take that joy, our joy, away from us in this “little while” before He comes again and we are with Him in His Kingdom forevermore.

“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.” Which makes me think of one of the dearest saints it has been my privilege to know. Her name was Willa. Willa loved to tease me – she said to keep me from getting a big head, but it was always kind-hearted and out of deep affection. And despite the fact that her life had been anything but easy, she was one of those people who just made you feel better about yourself, life, and everything in general after you had spent even just a few minutes talking with her.

She loved to laugh. And she was also the single finest maker of mayhaw jelly that I have ever known – and I’ve known some very good ones. And really good mayhaw jelly is one of the finest things I have ever put in my mouth. Mayhaws are little berries that grow only in the wetlands of the Deep South. Now, if you buy mayhaw jelly in the store (and Winslett’s sells it), you will probably wonder why I love it so. But you see, mayhaw jelly doesn’t lend itself very well to mass production. As everyone in southwest Georgia knew – where I was at the time – the only really good mayhaw jelly comes from someone’s home kitchen. And Willa was the best of the best – she could take those little berries and work magic with them. And because she knew I loved that jelly, she always had a jar ready for me. Sorry, I got a little distracted there – but that’s how good Willa’s mayhaw jelly actually was!

Anyway, while I was pastor down there, Willa died of a very long and very painful bout with cancer. In a way it was a fitting end to a long and often painful life. But you wouldn’t have known any of that if you had seen her during her illness. She continued to laugh, and to love, and to embrace life with a sense of wonder and gratitude. She continued to be just such a blessing to everyone who knew her. Before she died, she even taught Anne how to make her secret recipe mayhaw jelly, so her preach would be provided for when she gone!

But most of all, there was her trust in God. God wasn’t just something she believed in – God was an intimate and personal companion, Someone she had walked closely beside all the days of her life. In the course of her illness, I asked her one day where her strength was coming from, how she could continue to be such a source of joy to others, how she seemed to be so undiminished and unafraid in the face of her approaching death. She told me that it was not that she was not afraid – she said she was. But she knew it was going to be okay, despite her fears, because she knew God intimately, and because she knew that God was with her. She said God had been with her every step of her life thus far, and His grace had always somehow seen her through – good times and bad. And that’s why she was still so filled with love and peace – it was because her life was still so filled with gratitude for the grace of God. Like a tree planted by streams of living water, as the Psalmist put it.

And that is joy, what Willa had. That is joy. And that is the joy that Jesus wants to give to each one of us, wants us to possess in this “little while” of our own lives on earth. He wants us to

know that assurance and strength and fortitude of joy deep down in our bones and with every breath that we take. And Jesus will freely give us that joy, establish us in that joy, if we will but receive from Him.

Because, in truth and in the end, it is Jesus Himself – crucified and risen, ascended into heaven and one day coming back to earth again in glory – it is Jesus Himself who is our joy. *“I will see you again,”* He says to His first disciples. And *“I will see you again,”* He says to us this morning. *“I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”*

¹ I John 1:1-4, Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2223.

² Quoted in Emily Belz, “Grow Smaller,” in Timothy Keller: A Special Commemorative Issue from Christianity Today, Fall, 2023, p. 68.

³ Deuteronomy 33:27.