

“Your Grief Will Turn to Joy!”

A sermon based on John 16:16-22

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

It was about 1:00 in the morning at a Waffle House on the outskirts of Indianapolis. They were weary travelers ready to hit the pillow at the La Quinta Inn & Suites across the highway. But the rather robust, fun-loving waitress made their bedtime snack well worth pushing off sleep for an extra half an hour. You probably could imagine a waitress like her, so outgoing, bordering on obnoxious. And yet, all of her jokes and odd sayings aside, nothing was quite as memorable as her delivering an order of syrup-smothered pancakes and saying in her Hoosier accent, “Here ya go, honey. This’ll make your heart smile.”

I Tell You the Truth . . . Your Grief Will Turn to Joy

I. You will weep, mourn, and grieve

II. Your grief will turn to joy

I.

If only that were true. If only butter, syrup, and whipped cream on a stack of pancakes were all it took to make our hearts smile (although, some days, that seems to be all it takes, right?!?). Truth is, maybe it can make our hearts stop—but our hearts don’t always smile that easily, do they?

Well, today is Easter. Of all the days of the year, our hearts ought to be grinning from ventricle to ventricle today. Of all the days of the year, the alleluias that have been hidden for the six weeks of Lent should be pumping through our veins. Check your pulse, it should be going, “Hal-le-lu-jah, Hal-le-lu-jah” (Hallelujah Chorus). Is yours? Maybe yours is. If so, awesome!

But I doubt if your spiritual EKG always reads so positively. And I’m not alone in that prognosis. Our Savior once told his disciples, **“I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve . . .”** Weep. Mourn. Grieve. Just a few days after saying these words, that’s exactly what Jesus sees going on among his followers on Easter Sunday morning. With the rooster’s crow still ringing in his ears, Peter goes outside and weeps bitterly. Mary Magdalene, that faithful follower of Jesus, where do we find her early this morning? Wetting the graveside with her tears. Think of that trek from Pilate’s palace to the place of the skull. As Jesus stumbled to carry his cross, the daughters of Jerusalem mourned for him, lamenting a funeral dirge along the *Via Dolorosa* (Latin for the way of suffering). Or how about on the flip side of Easter? Even with the joy of the resurrected Lord, we see Peter hurting when Jesus asks him over a shoreline breakfast one day, “Do you love me?” (Jn 21:17).

Why do the Scriptures share such raw emotions? Because that’s reality. If we ever have this delusion that the Christian life is one of ease, read the Scriptures and see reality. Christians hurt. We weep with sadness. We mourn over losses. We grieve over guilt. But the pages of Scripture don’t have to tell us that, do they? No, in this case the pages of Scripture simply confirm what we see in our own lives. Your heart may be smiling today. You maybe woke up today and started singing, “Welcome, Happy Morning!” But I can guarantee that wasn’t the case every day since last Easter. And I can guarantee it won’t be the case every day until next Easter.

What has caused your tears this year? A loss of a job or a broken heart? Whose death did you mourn this year? A grandparent or a spouse? Are you still mourning over that loss from a few years back? What guilt has caused you to grieve this year? In worship Sunday after Sunday, we generically confess our “faithless worrying and selfish pride,” but what were the “sins of habit” or the “sins of choice”? Are we too embarrassed and ashamed to even think about them here in church? The real question today isn’t what pain you have or what’s causing your grief. The question is, how will you deal with it?

Jesus had an answer for his disciples. Just prior to saying they would weep, mourn, and grieve, he counsels, ***“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”*** ***Some of his disciples said to one another, ‘What does he mean by saying, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,” and “Because I am going to the Father”? They kept asking, ‘What does he mean by “a little while”? We don’t understand what he is saying.’ Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, ‘Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me”?’”***

Did you catch the key phrase? “A little while.” Seven times within three verses the Holy Spirit inspires John to record those words: a little while. They must be pretty important. Jesus is telling them and us, “Take a step back. See the big picture. Whatever you’re going through, whatever you’re going to go through, it won’t last long. Hang in there. In a little while, it’ll be over.”

Sometimes we maybe want to slap the person who says that. When you’re on mile 21 of a marathon and the person sitting in his lawn chair says, “Just a little while yet,” you want to retort, “Easy for you to say. ‘A little while’ it’ll be over. Why don’t you run the race yourself and see if it’s only ‘a little while?’”

But it’s different when Jesus says it. Jesus has a different perspective than anyone else who’s ever spoken those words. First of all, he’s all-knowing. He knows how long our “little whiles” are going to be. For the disciples, he knew most of them wouldn’t see him after they abandoned him in the garden. But he also knew he’d see them 96 hours later in the locked room. He knew exactly how long their little while would be. And he knows exactly how long your little whiles will be. He knows how long you’ll suffer with your sickness. He knows how long your heart will ache. And he promises not to let you suffer beyond what you can bear. Hang in there; it will be just “a little while.”

Not only is Jesus all-knowing, but he’s also eternal, meaning he’s got a much better grasp about how long our suffering really is in the whole scheme of things. Ask one of our elder members here today about how time flies. They don’t just say things like, “It seems like yesterday I was learning to ride my bike.” Experience has taught them how life goes by quickly. The last month of school that drags on for the high school senior is .5 percent of his life, but it’s only .1 percent of an 80-year-old’s life. Well, now consider our Savior’s eternal perspective. He knows our troubles are light and momentary compared to the eternal glory that awaits.

Little Jacob’s funeral was a stark reminder of that truth. Jacob was just two years old when cancer called him home. In a packed country church, the bell rang to signal the service. But instead of the organ playing and the pastor saying, “Please rise,” to show respect to the processing family, a voice came over the loud speaker. It was the grieving father. Not wanting to face the congregation out of fear he wouldn’t be able to say what he wanted to say, he timidly and quietly climbed up in to the pastor’s sacristy and spoke from his heart.

It wasn't the most polished speech in the world, but it was one of two beautiful sermons delivered that day. His voice, shaky from speaking publicly but confident in regards to the content, quietly yet clearly spoke: "Me and the wife just wants to thank you all for your loving support. It means so much. But we also want to let you know that today is not a sad day because we got to do something that not every parent gets to do . . . we got to usher Jacob all the way to heaven where our Savior took him from our arms into his."

Then the pastor went on that day to preach on these words: ***"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. . . . I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy."***

II.

I didn't read that part earlier, did I? **"I tell you the truth . . . your grief will turn to joy."** That's how the passage ends. Not, "Your grief will be replaced by joy." Not, "Your grief will coincide with joy." But, "Your grief will turn to joy." That's what Easter's all about. It takes a sad, seemingly hopeless situation and it turns it to joy. For the disciples, they mourned and grieved over the loss of their Savior. But when they saw him again after a little while, they realized their Savior's death was a payment for their sin. In view of Easter, the cross that caused them so much grief two days prior turned into a source of joy for them.

Look what Easter does to the grave. There was Mary, crying at the tomb. But when her Savior stood next to her and called her by name, Easter turned that cold hole in the rock into the rock of her faith, as it powerfully declared Jesus to be whom he claimed to be, the Son of God. Easter turned her grief into joy.

But Easter didn't just change things for the disciples or the women at the tomb. It does it for you and for me. Instead of the guilt and grief of seeing our sins pinned on the cross, Easter turns the cross into a gift as we are assured God accepted Christ's payment on our behalf. Instead of weeping at the grave of our loved one, Easter turns our tears into droplets magnifying the blessings we enjoy on this earth and the sure hope we have of being reunited with our loved ones where Jesus wipes every tear from our eyes. Instead of lying awake at night fearing our own death, Easter turns our fears into a longing for a pleasant sleep where our souls enjoy heaven while we wait to be reunited with our glorious bodies on the Last Day. No matter how you look at it, Easter turns our grief into joy.

It was only a few years ago that a Hindu woman went to visit a Christian missionary who had converted her 16-year-old daughter. The woman asked, "What did you do to our girl?" The missionary replied, "We did nothing." To which the girl's mother said, "Oh, yes you did. My daughter died yesterday, and she died smiling. Our people do not die that way." Because of Jesus, that girl's heart was smiling. Nothing could take that away from her. Not a family that disagreed with her beliefs. Not her guilt over sin. Not even death.

And nothing can take that away from you. Christ is risen! May that put a smile in your heart today and always. Alleluia! Amen.