

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

It had to have been an intense moment, one of many that evening. Jesus says to His disciples, “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” Immediately, they begin to wonder and ask among themselves what Jesus means by this “little while.” What is it? When will it be? And how long will it last?

The questions no doubt had a sense of urgency in them, because the mood that night was foreboding. That night, Thursday of Holy Week, they had celebrated the Passover together. But this Passover hadn’t been like others.

Rather than explaining the meal elements in the customary way, Jesus had said that the bread they shared was His body, the cup they drank was His blood. What was that?

He had said that He would not partake of it again until He drank it anew with them in His Father’s kingdom. Where was He going?

Jesus had said that one of them – the Twelve, His closest friends – would betray Him. “Is it I,” they ask.

He had told them that they would be thrown out of the synagogues and even put to death because of Him. Put all this together, and the disciples can sense that something big is coming, something ominous, though they don’t know what. And now their beloved Master tells them that, a little while, and they wouldn’t see Him. What was going on?

We too have times similar to the disciples. Times when it seems that things are changing, and not – we feel – for the better.

Times when we’re not sure what Jesus is saying to us in His Word. Times when it seems like we can’t see Jesus for all the trouble and sadness and anger and sin that are in the world, and in us. We too wonder what Jesus is doing, what Jesus is saying. Has He left us, even for a little while?

Like the disciples, we wonder. Yet in these times we are blessed, for we can consider the whole of Scripture, which those disciples didn’t have, and as we consider these words of Jesus about “a little while” we can see that we need not have fear or worry, but rather, we are given confidence and hope, even in our “little whiles.”

If we’re going to figure out what this “little while” is and how it applies to us, the first place we should probably start is to ask what Jesus says about it. How does He describe it?

For starters, it’s “little.” Now this can be more or less helpful. Little is a relative term. In the scope of a day, a little while might be an hour. In the scope of your lifetime, a little while could be several years. And in the scope of eternity, well, who knows. So we don’t have a definite length of time, but we know that whatever it is, in the big picture, it’s quite small. It’s a little while.

Jesus also says of this little while that it’s a time when the disciples will not be able to see Jesus. He won’t be readily visible, obviously present, as He is at that moment speaking to them. Note, though, that He doesn’t say that He’s gone – just that they won’t be able to see Him.

Further, this little while will be a time of sadness for the disciples, and a time when the world will rejoice. He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice.” Whatever this little while is, it will be a time when those who follow Jesus are given to be sorrowful, and that whatever is causing them to be sorrowful will be something that makes the world happy.

But this sorrow will not last forever – it will only last for a little while. After that, Jesus says, it will be turned to joy, and the joy will be so great that the sorrow is forgotten.

So what is it, then? We’d like it if Jesus would have just spelled it out for us. Yet He leaves it a little more open, because there are several instances that can fit the description, and the ways in which these instances are connected helps us learn from them.

So the first occasion that could fit this “little while” is the crucifixion and burial of Jesus. In a little while, perhaps a matter of hours, Jesus will be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the disciples will all flee. Even if they watch Him from afar as He suffers and dies, He will be hidden from their sight when He is placed into the tomb. And even after the stone is rolled away and Peter and John run to the tomb, all they’ll find is the burial cloths.

They will hide in the locked room, afraid, sorrowful, and as they do, no doubt the members of the Sanhedrin will be celebrating their victory over this threat to their authority. Pontius Pilate probably feels some joy and relief as another potential uprising has been nipped in the bud.

But in a little while, on the third day, Jesus rises from the tomb. He appears to the disciples as they gather in fear and says, “Peace be with you,” turning their sorrow into joy. A week later, when Thomas is there, the Lord has him put his fingers into the nail marks and his hand into His side, and those wounds, which were the cause of Thomas’s sorrow, are turned to joy, as they prove to this formerly-doubting disciple that his Lord and his God is indeed risen.

So there’s the crucifixion and resurrection as one “little while.” What else might fit? Another little while could certainly be the life of the Christian Church herself after Jesus ascends into heaven. After Jesus is taken up into the clouds, the disciples stand there, gazing, but they no longer see their Lord. He has ascended to the right hand of the Father.

Now, this is a source of joy for those first disciples, and the Church has found joy in our Lord’s ascension ever since then, but there’s also been a considerable amount of sorrow in the meantime.

As you read through Acts, there are plenty of occasions that bring sorrow. Stephen’s martyrdom. The persecutions led by Saul. The prophecy that Paul will never get to see the Ephesian elders again in this life.

And it doesn’t stop with Acts. Throughout the ages, countless Christians have suffered and died for the sake of Jesus and the truth of His Word. Thousands upon thousands of martyrs shed their blood, and countless more suffered the loss of possessions, reputation, and even family for His name’s sake. The Church has sorrow, and all the while, the world rejoiced, celebrating their seeming victories over this silly “Jesus-cult.”

And it continues still today. Christians meeting secretly in China are thrown into prison for not worshiping in a party-approved church. Christian villages in Nigeria are raided by Muslim herdsman, their men shot, their women kidnapped and dishonored. Christians in the United Kingdom are arrested

for praying silently – in their heads – outside abortion clinics. Christian teachers and Christian children are shot to death in a Christian school in Nashville – in the Bible belt – and the world says the true victim is the shooter.

All around the world, the cry goes up to heaven, “How long, O Lord?” Even in heaven, St. John is shown the saints crying out to the Lord with this very question.

And what are they told? There, in Revelation chapter 6, we read, “Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”

Rest a little longer – a little while. They can rest, because Christ has turned their sorrow into joy, as He said He would. At the cross, Christ broke the power of death. And so for Christians, to die is simply to enter into God’s rest. We sing of this wonderful truth in our sermon hymn, where in the last stanza we confess that “Christ has made my death a portal from the strife of this life to His joy immortal!”

Every time a Christian is put to death by the enemies of Christ, that Christian is brought into the eternal joys of heaven. Every time the Church is persecuted, she is strengthened and grown. Every Christian whose eyes are closed in the sleep of death will open them to see the Savior.

Christians mourn as their brothers and sisters are made to suffer and die, and yet they have joy that the world cannot take from them – the promise of the Resurrection. As surely as Jesus rose from the grave, so too will all who fall asleep in Him rise, and they will never die again.

The ages that that the Church suffers may seem long, but compared to the eternal wedding feast that awaits this bride of Christ, it is just a little while.

And speaking of that wedding feast, it is yet another way in which we wait for a little while to see our Lord Jesus. Prior to His words to the disciples in our Gospel reading, Jesus had this to say to the Pharisees: “I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me. You will seek Me and not find Me, and where I am you cannot come.”

So to those who did not believe in Him, Jesus would be with them for a little while, but then He would be gone. Contrast that to what He says to those who believe in Him: “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” So there is a time when the world does not see Him, but we His people see Him.

Where could this be, but in His Supper? When the unbelieving world looks at it, it sees bread and wine. It sees some sort of ritual, or symbol. It sees silly Christians feeding their delusions. And it mocks and laughs. “How could such things be body and blood? Are you cannibals? It’s as silly as someone rising from the dead!”

But by the faith poured into our hearts, we are able to see the truth. Jesus says that He is in the bread and wine. To see the wafer, to look into the cup, is to see Jesus. In the Sacrament, we see our Lord. Though we must wait a little while, a week or more, between when we get to see Him, nevertheless He returns, again and again, to be with us, to give us His joy and peace and life as we take Him into ourselves.

The Sacrament is where our Lord wonderfully reminds us that He is with us always, even to the end of the age. And this is true for every single Christian.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon, each of us will have times that are our own “little whiles.” You all I am sure have had times where it seemed that you could not see Jesus, where He didn’t seem to be there. Times of uncertainty. Times of sorrow. Times of suffering. Times where you have cried out, “O Lord, how long?” And where you have suffered for the sake of the name of Jesus, you will have heard the world laughing as well.

In these times, look to the promises of Christ in the Word, and to His faithfulness to His disciples throughout the ages, and know that He will bring you through your little whiles as well. Remember, He says that you may not be able to see Him; He doesn’t say that He isn’t there. There’s a big difference between the two. He has promised to never leave you nor forsake you, and He cannot break His promise. You may not see Him, but He is there nonetheless.

He has also promised to turn your sorrow into joy. Not that He will take the sorrow away and replace it with joy, but that He turns the first into the second. Your Lord will turn whatever is causing you sadness and pain into something that brings joy.

How, exactly, He will do this, He doesn’t say. He may use that little while to get to recognize an idol in your life and get rid of it. He may use that little while to teach you to rely completely on Him and not look to the things of the world for your assurance. He may use that little while to let your light shine, even in hardship and suffering, that others might see you enduring faithfully and come to faith in Him. Or He may have other reasons entirely, known only to Him, but which He was promised are for your good.

How long will it take to turn this sorrow into joy? A little while. You might be tempted to take the quick and easy way out, to seek the first opening for relief, but trust in Him, that He will bring about the greatest good, even if it must hurt for a little while.

This is seen in Christ’s own illustration of childbirth. Pregnancy is inconvenient, uncomfortable, even painful. You can take the quick and easy way out – abortion – and it will seem like you’ve ended the little while of suffering. But the long term result is tragic, awful, and one that stays with you forever. Yet enduring through the little while of pregnancy, suffering through the pain of childbirth, brings about a wonderful blessing – another life in the world.

As you endure your own little whiles, remember how God turned His own Son’s suffering and death to good, and He has turned the suffering of His Church throughout the ages to good. He will not fail to do the same for you.

He will see you again. He will make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. He will bring you through your little while and give you joy. And the joy that He gives – true joy, lasting joy – that joy no one will be able to take from you.

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