

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)

Jubilate – April 21, 2024

John 16:16-22 – A Little While

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

“A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me.”

Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night he was betrayed, telling them he will soon depart. He is going to his Father, ascending into heaven. So there will be a little while, from God's perspective, where he will be hidden from us until he returns on the Last Day.

Well, the little while has not been very little. More like a long while. Is this some cruel joke, Jesus, to call two thousand years of waiting for your return a little while?

And not only do the ages seem to drag by slowly until he comes again, but our own lives drag slowly too. We spend our days in toil. Always waiting for the next break, for the next holiday or vacation, waiting for retirement, waiting for kids and grandkids to grow up, waiting for goals that never fully come to fruition. Not to mention the spiritual struggle, constantly fighting sin, enduring temptation, discouragement, and depression. And the daily sorrows of our dying bodies, as we remember those who have fallen asleep, and we see ourselves aging and getting weaker day by day. The more deeply we turn to Christ and his church, the more our sorrows increase, the more the world scorns us, and the more dissatisfied we become with this world and impatient we get for the life to come.

Today is supposedly Jubilate Sunday, the Sunday of jubilation and celebration. Shout to God with joy, all the earth. “You have sorrow now,” says Jesus, “but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

But our jubilation feels muted. The waiting continues. The trumpet has not sounded, the Lord has not returned in glory. Our joy is not yet. And for all we know, maybe this is still only the beginning of the little while. Maybe we still have thousands of years more to wait.

It seems so discouraging, this little while. If only it were done. From God's perspective, we know, it's only a little while. But not from ours.

2 Peter 3 offers some comfort. “Do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

The slowness of God is for good reason. It's out of grace, so the full number may turn and repent and be saved. The little while is taking a long time because of God's love, and his patience, and abundant mercy. It's only from our perspective that the wait is so long.

But if you're trying to cheer yourself up by remembering that God is patient and merciful, that the wait for the second coming is only a little while from God's perspective, then you haven't fully understood the point Jesus is making in John 16.

Because in John 16, the not-so-little while of waiting for the second coming of Christ isn't primarily what Jesus is talking about. Jesus primarily means a time that really is a little while. Not just from God's perspective, but from ours. In fact, the time of mourning and waiting is already over and done. The night is far gone, the day is at hand! The time to rejoice and be jubilant is here already.

Because, in the simplest and most straightforward sense, the little while of John 16 is only a few hours. Jesus is telling his disciples, as he sits with them on Maundy Thursday after supper, he's saying that in a few hours he will be arrested and crucified on the cross. Then he will die, and be taken down, and buried in the tomb, and they will not see him anymore. Not even 24 more hours, he's saying, and you will not see me. Then you will weep and lament, when I am laid in the tomb, but the world rejoice to see me dead.

And yet he continues. “You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.” For “Again a little while and you will see me.” Three days, to be exact. And not even three 24-hour days. Not a full 72 hours. The Jewish calendar counts the new day as starting at sunset, not midnight. So the counting of three days begins just before sunset on the day he was crucified. Really, the first day Jesus was in the tomb was only about an hour or

so. And then there were the full 24 hours from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, the Sabbath day, when he rested in the tomb. And then there were only about 10 more hours from sunset on Saturday night to sunrise Sunday morning, the third day. So “again a little while and you will see me,” Jesus really only means about 35 more hours after his burial until your sorrow is turned to joy.

And here we are, four Sundays into the Easter season. Jesus lives, the victory’s won! The resurrection is old news, done and complete. Our Lord has been alive and reigning triumphant for nearly two thousand years. Two thousand times the church has celebrated his resurrection and kept the mighty feast, two thousand Easter seasons our sorrow has been turned into joy.

We know our Redeemer lives, and therefore he will certainly stand at last upon the earth. For we already know his victory. Alleluia! The night of tears is done.

Here we are, at the beginning of the long green season, the season after Easter when the church gets ready for the long wait, the weeks and weeks of the Trinity season. Trinity continues all the way through November, to its culmination in the last Sundays of the church year, the end times and All Saints Day and the second coming. But today, on Jubilate Sunday we’re standing on the mountaintop, on a high vantage point. We’re looking out ahead across the expanse of time, across the coming six months, months which are a picture of the long thousands of years of growth and waiting of the church, waiting for the second coming of Christ.

But today we stand here and rejoice. We get to see it all from God’s perspective. We can even call those thousands of years a little while. Because already, from here, the wait is over. The little while is done. The Lord is risen, his wedding banquet is started. Here on earth, in our midst in the church, as we sing with all the angels and archangels, as we eat and drink the heavenly bread and wine, we know for certain that our Jesus is with us. He never left us for a moment, not since his resurrection day. He’s with us always, in his word and sacrament, to the end of the age.

What a beautiful, joyous sight. The weeping is already joy. The birth pangs are already over. Like a woman a few moments after giving birth, she’s already forgotten her pain, for joy that a human being is born into the world. Today we really can rejoice in songs of jubilation. Because heaven is ours, eternal life is sure. We already see the Redeemer, standing in triumph.

By faith we see him already, reigning forever. “Who is this that comes from Edom, all his raiment stained with blood?... Tis the Savior now victorious, traveling onward in his might, ’Tis the Savior, Oh how glorious to his people is the sight! Satan conquered and the grave, Jesus now is strong to save.”

It’s all so certain, because of the resurrection of Jesus. Because Easter is here, Satan’s power of death is broken. The Second Coming is already a given, as good as done. Now our death, and the death of our loved ones, and all the sorrows of this dying world, they’re all over and forgotten. All because Christ is risen, and the little while, his 35 hours or so in the tomb, all of it is history.

Today, viewing all time and eternity from God’s perspective, we know once for all that it really is a little while. All eternity rolled into a moment, in this glorious vision, all the ages of human suffering, all the thousands of years of waiting, all caught and skipped over and forgotten in an instant. See it now, and look beyond it! Look into the eternal ages of ages of paradise! Know for certain that Christ is yours today. Weep tears of joy! For nothing whatsoever can ever take him away. Alleluia! Heaven is open, Jesus is here, and there is no end.

“Never shall Thy people never, cease to sing what thou hast done. Thou hast fought thy people’s foes, thou has healed thy people’s woes.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.