

A Little While

“Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” Is life going to give you a caramel, something bitter, something melty and cream-filled, or something that sticks in your teeth? Cait and I stopped by Beerntsen’s a few nights ago, and I tell you, you’re never too old to be a kid in a candy shop. Actually, I ran into one of our preschoolers there who helped me pick out a candy to take home.

The text before us today makes me think of a kid in a candy shop. There’s so much opportunity for joy with all the chocolates and ice cream - until Mom and Dad say, “Maybe not today. You have to wait until after dinner to eat this. If you finish your vegetables...” Then the weeping and wailing begins. The waiting seems unimaginably insufferable. But when the child finally gets to open that sweet treat, all the sorrow is forgotten. Just pure joy.

The disciples in this gospel lesson are like little kids in another way. They don’t quite understand what’s going on. They hear the adult in the room telling them something, but they don’t know what he means. What is this “little while” he’s talking about? What do you mean, Jesus? They repeat the phrase over and over, and they try to figure it out, but they need their teacher to explain it to them. Today, we’ll also mull this over: What does Jesus mean by “a little while?” When and how can we have this complete joy? Jesus makes everything clear for his beloved children. In a little while, we will see him again, and how sweet that will be!

This section from John comes in the same extended section that happened on Holy Thursday, the night Jesus was betrayed. He wanted to prepare his disciples for what was coming next. At other times, Jesus plainly predicted his betrayal, suffering, death, and resurrection. But here, he spoke a bit vaguely. **“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”** Like any good Christian, we ask, “What does this mean?”

Shortly after Jesus finished talking to his disciples, he would be taken away from them. His enemies were coming to arrest him. Jesus would be put on trial, sentenced to death, and crucified. The disciples wouldn’t have their friend and teacher right by their side. Naturally, this would cause

immense grief. Jesus guaranteed it: **“Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve...”** Their whole world was turned upside down.

But this turmoil wouldn’t last long. On the third day, after his time away from them in the tomb, Jesus rose again. He appeared to his disciples, lifting them out of their grief and filling them with joy. They thought their story had ended in tragedy, but Jesus brought them a joy that no one could take away. On top of that, he cleared away all their confusion. They wouldn’t have to ask Jesus anything, because he put together all the pieces of the puzzle.

With the resurrection, the disciples finally got it. They could understand why Jesus went away. They finally knew the whole purpose of what Jesus came to do. The disciples could comprehend the full picture of God’s saving plan. And *that* brought them true, complete joy.

Well, great. The disciples got a happy ending to their story. Except did they? Maybe you know how their lives played out after Jesus ascended into heaven and they went out to spread the good news. Many of the Jews around them still tried to stop the gospel, arresting them again and again. They were driven out of towns, stoned to death, beaten and flogged. We hear how Paul, the most prominent missionary of the New Testament era, was shipwrecked and lashed and left for dead. The life of a Christian in the early Church was filled with grief and sorrow and pain. They faced death every day. But that same Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice.”

I don’t personally know any Christians who face death every day for the sake of the gospel. But we do have lives filled with grief and sorrow and pain. Satan still sucks joy out of our lives however he can. Maybe as much as you crave a loving, happy family, it never seems to happen. Whether you’re burdened by a troublesome child, a fractured marriage, you’ve been divorced multiple times, everyone is constantly fighting. Or you can’t even start a family - you feel stuck as a single person, or you and your spouse have struggled to have children. Where’s the joy in these homes?

Perhaps Satan tries to sap your joy somewhere else. You punch into a soulless job day after day, week after week. You hate your boss, you dread your coworkers, and you’re just putting in time until retirement. Or the devil attacks your health. You’ve lived with a chronic condition from

birth. Or you tried to maintain your body with a healthy diet and routine exercise, but suddenly, you have a crippling illness.

Your own mind fights against you, filling the airspace with toxic, negative thoughts that make some days impossible to handle. An unexpected disaster devastates your home, your car, and you don't have the money to fix it. For many of us, grief comes with that loss of a loved one. When, like the disciples, we suddenly don't have that pillar to lean on, we're left hurting and confused. Where is our joy?

If we base our joy on the circumstances around us, we'll never have lasting joy. The devil loves to snatch away that loose, flimsy joy by ruining our circumstances. First, he convinces us that it's worthwhile to seek pleasure in money, that we should be taking care of our bodies, our minds, and families - that will bring us fulfillment! These are all good things, gifts from God. But they won't ever bring us complete joy. All those worldly things we want will perish and spoil. When everything earthly passes away, where's our joy?

We're acting like little children again. Kids will ask their parents for anything. Sometimes their requests can be downright ridiculous. And the adults know that's not what the child needs. As much as the kid whines and wails if they don't get their way, the grown-up won't give them something they know will harm them. Mom and Dad, grandma and grandpa, they all have what's best in mind.

So it is with God. We may *think* we know what will bring us true, lasting joy in this life, and we bring those requests to God. But the Father sees beyond this life. He knows that we don't understand the whole picture, so he sets things up so that we can have complete joy. Just as Jesus guaranteed the disciples would have grief, he assures us that we will experience trouble in this world. But just as sure as we'll have grief, Jesus promises that our pain will turn to joy. Why? We will see him again.

Now, this "little while" that we have to wait is often a burden. It's hard to hold on until Jesus comes again. But we don't have to live just gritting our teeth and waiting for Jesus to return. Our joy is made complete now because Jesus already came back. This is still the Easter season, where we see how our lives are changed because he lives. We have present, lasting joy because Jesus rose and appeared to his disciples. He's already put all the pieces together in God's plan of salvation. Christ completely kept the

law in obedience to the Father. Christ gave that perfect life as the complete sacrifice on the cross to cancel the power of sin and crush the devil's head. And Christ rose from the grave to defeat death forever. Joy, oh joy, beyond all gladness, Christ has done away with sadness!

"But Pastor, I still don't always feel joyful. I'm not the kind of person who belts out hymns. I don't always feel like plastering this fake smile on my face. It's not as simple as just flipping a paddle over and everything's peachy keen." Our lasting joy isn't a feeling. It's a confident conviction that overcomes our circumstances. Because Jesus has overcome the world, because he won the victory, we know that we have joy. We *own* this joy, now and forever. Our joy comes from Jesus, no matter what trouble and hardship come our way. We face our grief and sorrow head on knowing it's only for a little while.

Jesus used a powerful image to convey this transition from unimaginable pain to incomparable joy. He said it's like a woman giving birth to a child. Now, because I don't have any children, and I'll never personally experience the physical wonder of childbirth, I reached out to a few moms here at Grace. Maybe you mothers out there can relate to their pains: miscarriages; long, painful, never-ending, difficult deliveries; moments even after birth where you weren't sure your daughter would live; the weeks of recovery; postpartum depression and feeding challenges and parenting struggles throughout their life. For each one of these mothers, they said it was all worth it. The doubts and worries and pain - all forgotten at the first cry of that baby. A whole new person in the world - and some even immediately thought, maybe this little one needs a sibling!

What joy we have from this new life in the world! Not the new life of a baby, but the new life we have in Christ. We're not immediately free from pain, but we do have complete joy. We can actually be like little children. We may not understand everything in life - and we don't need to; Jesus is in control. When the day of completeness comes at the end, then we will see everything fully.

And for now, we can fully trust God like a kid trusts his father. We don't know exactly how long he'll be gone. Sometimes we even wonder *why* he's gone. But in a little while, all our grief will turn to never-ending joy. While we wait, we pray that God would give us more clarity to understand this joy in Christ. Oh, the sweet joy this sentence gives, both now and forever: "I know that my Redeemer lives!" Amen.