

Jubilate, the Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 21, 2024

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

WAITING IN THE LITTLE WHILE

John 16:16-22

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Christ Jesus has indeed risen from the dead. All the enemies of your spiritual and eternal welfare have been defeated. Your sins have been forgiven. He has won for you new life and salvation. You have been declared righteous in God the Father's eyes. Even heaven itself is yours through Him. All of this is yours because Christ who died now lives. And yet we do not fully experience or enjoy these truths in this life. We know that they are true, but we also know that we must wait for this mortality to put on immortality and for faith to give way to sight to have them in their fullness. This is why we so eagerly await our Lord's return. Theologians like to say of these things that they are ours now, but not yet.

Today's lessons focus more on the not yet than on the now. Jesus said to His disciples: "A little while and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father." Though the disciples were perplexed by this when He said it, we understand rightly that Jesus was speaking of His ascension to heaven and of His promised return on the Last Day. The little while when we will not see Him has come to pass, for forty days after His resurrection our Lord did indeed bodily ascend into heaven. That little while came to pass rather quickly. But the little while until our Lord returns from heaven has lasted nearly 2000 years. That's a long time wait. And we are likely to say as the disciples said: "What is this that He says to us 'A little while'?"

Remember being a child and being impatient with adult things? Are we there yet? In a little while. Can we go home now? I just ordered another coffee; we'll go in a little while. Oh how I hated to hear, "in a little while!" And yet you knew and trusted that eventually, regardless of the time frame, the little while would give way to the now. Eventually the tedious, tiring waiting would come to an end.

When Jesus says that He will return in "a little while" He means it. We don't know the time-frame because we can't see it from His Divine perspective. But we know that He will always do what He has promised to do. The real questions for us are not questions of whether or not He will return, but rather of what do we do in the mean time? How do we make use of the time He has given us? How do we go about our lives? How do we endure the wait faithfully?

Solomon tells us in Lamentations: "The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for

the salvation of the Lord.” Waiting is never easy. And Jesus makes it clear that our wait is not an easy one either. Here it is not a childish boredom or eagerness that is the problem. The difficulty is that we are called to wait in a very hostile environment.

Our Lord tells us: “Most assuredly I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice...” The people of this world rejoice in their sinfulness, enjoying their brief lives without thought of God’s righteousness or of His wrath. They are spiritually dead creatures rejoicing in the things proper to themselves, the things of death that eventually bring death. But this rejoicing is short-lived, for it ends in despair, in sorrow, and in physical and eternal death.

Meanwhile we weep and lament, for this world is hostile to us, hostile to our faith, hostile to Christ and His Truth. And our old sinful nature, the flesh as Paul calls it, is of this dying world. It lusts for the things that bring destruction and death to itself. And hence it is at war with the soul. So St. Peter writes: “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe glorify God in the day of visitation.”

And when you do abstain from the sinful things this world finds so precious and enjoyable, when you live your life honorably, in the fear of God, this world will hate you for it, for you will stand as a living indictment of it. Your life in Christ reveals in their minds their own death and demise. Seeing you they see what they do not have and do not want, but desperately need. And so the world will strike out against you. Hence St. Peter alludes to the fact that many will suffer on account of doing good, and this we are to take patiently after the pattern of Christ.

But the sorrow we endure in this life will turn to joy as the little while, the not yet, becomes the now. Our Lord gives the example of a woman giving birth: “A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world.” Now in childbirth the pain that is endured produces something good. The child moves from the womb into the world. Left in the wound, the labor pains never having come, the child dies and perhaps the mother too. The labor, which is painful, is necessary for the child’s life. And the joy that is had over the child that is finally born and healthy is far greater than the joy over the child that is hidden within, developing in the womb. This is why parents celebrate the birth of their children, often saying that the day the child is born is one of the best days of the parents’ lives. But that day does not come without the pain of labor.

So also with us. Though this life is often full of pain and sorrow, the pain of this life is intended to do several things. It helps to purify us, turning us away from sinning and from sinful things. It causes us, you see, to value this world and its ways

less than we did when we were not afflicted, and to value the gifts and promises of Christ more. The sorrows of this life are intended to turn our eyes away from the worldly and toward the heavenly. The pains of this life are intended by God to cause us to look to the time when the little while is at last over, when the not yet will become the now.

And yet God knows that we would not endure the pains and sorrows of this life faithfully if left to our selves and forced to endure by our own strength. As Solomon says: "Though [the Lord] causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies. For He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men." And in His compassion he gives us even now in the midst of this life with all its temptations, all its trials, all its suffering and pain, the multitude of His mercies through the grace of Christ Jesus. In Christ, our risen Lord, the Heavenly Father gives us a foretaste of the not yet right now. For Christ is both the beginning and the end, and even heaven itself is found in Him.

When Jesus speaks His Gospel into your ears and into your hearts, and you receive what He says to you by faith, you have already His forgiveness and righteousness. When Jesus washes you with the waters of regeneration in Holy Baptism, He puts within you His Spirit, the promised "fountain of water springing up into everlasting life", giving you already spiritual resurrection and rebirth. He gives you in Holy Communion that "food which endures to everlasting life," His own holy body and precious blood. And in all of these things, He who has gone to the Father is truly, and in the Sacrament physically, present with you in your waiting. By His gifts, by His presence among and with you, He strengthens you to wait, to endure, and even to suffer faithfully. "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not." Or in the words of today's Introit chant: "He keeps our soul among the living, and does not all our feet to be moved."

And one day this little while will indeed come to an end. The not yet will become the now. For our risen Lord says to us: "I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

+ Soli Deo gloria +