

Jubilate (The Fourth Sunday of Easter)

11 May 2025

John 16:16-22

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—Amen

The text for this morning's sermon is the Holy Gospel appointed for today from the Holy Gospel According to St. John, the sixteenth chapter.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

At this point in the season of Easter, we begin to turn our eyes toward our Lord's ascension. That's one reason that the lectionary gives us this reading from John, chapter 16.

Jesus says, "In a little while you are not going to see me anymore, and again in a little while you will see me, because I am going away to the Father."

This text is going in two directions at the same time. On one hand, it refers to the ascension. We know this because Jesus specifically talks about the fact that He is going to the Father. But we must also bear in mind that Jesus says this on Maundy Thursday evening. The disciples are going to remember these words when Jesus is taken from them the next day.

And so, two pairs of events are coming which will prove the truth of our Lord's words. The first is His death and resurrection. The second is His ascension and His return in glory.

When the disciples remember these words after Jesus dies, it should give them comfort. Not only is Jesus dying in their place on the cross to win for them eternal life and salvation, Jesus says that He's only going away for a little while. He says that after a little while, they will see Him again. But the disciples don't hear the comfort the words give. They weep and wail as Jesus says they will. In fact, the gospels suggest that during the time in which Jesus is in the tomb, there is no one who actually believes in Him at all.

When Jesus rises from the dead, the disciples are filled with joy, but not right away. It's more complicated than that. They have to see Him with their own eyes first. They have to hear Him speak to them first. They have to chew on this new reality for a while. And none of that comes easily. It's hard work to believe in something like the resurrection of Jesus. And that should make sense to us.

After all, it is an absolutely unique event in all of human history. A man was tortured to death, and on the third day He rose from the dead on His own power. It is an absolutely unique event in all of human history, and that doesn't make it any easier to wrap your head around it. In fact, it makes it harder. Our minds want everything in the world to work in a consistent and predictable way. We are suspicious of statistical outliers.

So, when it comes to the events of Easter, it's much easier for an ordinary human being to believe that it's all a hoax. It's much easier to go with the principle which was the standard both then and now: dead people stay dead.

But there's no joy in that; there's only despair. There's only the hard assertion that the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh are always wanting to make: Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die. And that's it. That's where the unholy trinity wants it all to end.

If this life is all there is, then all that we suffer is without meaning. For the disciples, this is the way they think about their lives until Jesus appears to them on Sunday night. Life is futile and without meaning. Suffering is just suffering. There's no point to it. There's nothing beyond the pain of the moment.

But everything changes when one realizes that what Jesus promised was true. "A little while and you will see me no longer and then again a little while and you will see me." When the end is an empty tomb and a risen Jesus, everything is different.

C.S. Lewis once said that if surgery didn't have as its end the restoration of health, it would be nothing less than gruesome torture perpetrated by a trained sadist. It would be evil in the extreme. We wouldn't tolerate it. We would lock up every surgeon and throw away the key. Lewis saw hope in Christ the same way. Without it, all of the suffering of life would be meaningless. The Christian life would be a pathetic exercise in futility if our hope was not grounded in something which is real and certain.

Lewis didn't want to see God as a sadistic surgeon who inflicts pain on us for no reason. And, of course, we don't want to see God that way either. And that's why it is so important that Christ is risen from the dead. He is risen indeed, and that changes everything.

Easter changes everything. Jesus is risen from the dead, never to die again, and this shows us the end of all of our suffering. It ends in life eternal. It ends in joy without end. It ends in everything that is hard, sad, or difficult in our lives coming untrue. Just as the cut of a surgeon's scalpel ends in healing, so does our suffering end in resurrection and life eternal.

And so, we have hope. We can have the same hope the disciples have after they see Jesus—the same hope which leads them to suffer all, even death, rather than take back the eyewitness accounts which they have passed on to us in the Scripture.

And because the apostles have given us the Scripture, our hope is certain. We don't need to wonder about whether Jesus is actually risen. We need not have any kind of doubt at all, because we have the best evidence we could possibly have in the pages of Holy Scripture. Classical scholars would give their left kidney to have the kind of manuscript evidence for the works of Caesar, Cicero, Herodotus, and Thucydides that we have for the New Testament.

The resurrection of Jesus is one of the best attested facts in all of recorded history, and so we need not wonder about it at all. You can bet your eternity on it with no chance of losing.

His death and resurrection is the first pair of events Jesus' words bring to mind, but when Jesus says that He's going to the Father, He's also referencing His ascension and His return in glory. "In a little while you are not going to see me anymore, and again in a little while you will see me, because I am going away to the Father."

There are several things which are striking if we think of these words of Jesus in light of His ascension. First and foremost is the phrase "a little while." The first "a little while" refers to the ascension, which will happen just six weeks from when Jesus speaks these words. The second "a little while" is what we're living right now. It refers to Jesus's return in glory—almost two thousand years, and counting.

But Jesus refers to the almost two thousand years which have passed since His ascension as "a little while" and we have no right to think otherwise. If Jesus says it's "a little while," it is. God is not slow to keep His promises. He isn't breaking His promise by not working on a timeline which might make more sense to us. Instead, He is waiting until the fullness of time has come. He's waiting until all of His elect have come to faith. He is waiting for all of us to hear the words of salvation and life which flow from His work for us on the cross. He is waiting for exactly the right time to return.

And, for us, it's a little while. It could be any second now, or it could be after we die. But in comparison with the eternity which awaits us, no matter whether it is tomorrow or four thousand years from now, it is but a little while.

In any case, we are washed in the blood of Jesus. We are baptized into His Name. We are heirs of eternal life and salvation, and in a just a few moments we will be fed with the very medicine of immortality.

And this is all wonderful, universe shaping stuff. When all of creation looks upon what is happening here in this service this morning, it groans in birth pangs. It waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be fully revealed.

There is literally nothing in the universe more important than what is happening right here, right now. Your sins are being forgiven. You are remembering what Christ did for you on Good Friday when He died in your place. You are rejoicing in His resurrection and ascension. You are looking forward with eager expectation to the day of His return.

Everything which has happened in the universe up to this moment has been for the purpose of you hearing this good news, and all of creation is just as eager for it as you are.

In a little while, you will see Him for you are forgiven for all your sins.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit—Amen

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus—
Amen

Sermon based on one by the Rev. Charlie Lehmann