

The Third Sunday of Easter 2020

I Peter 2:11ff

John 16:16ff

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Hearing these phrases does it really come as any surprise to you that the disciples were confused? The Gospel for today may seem a bit out of place in the season of Easter with its words about absence and sorrow. We can gain a connection to this story when we consider the distance, we, too, experience between our hopes on one hand, and the realities around us that seem to darken or sober those hopes. Dostoevsky, the great Russian writer once commented, “The darker the night, the brighter are the stars. The deeper the grief, the closer is God.” This observation points us to the heart of the Gospel for today from John 16. (Actually, we get only one-half of the passage on this Sunday, and will get the second half in two weeks.) Place these words of Dostoevsky alongside this Gospel, “Now, therefore you have sorrow, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.” Two apparently incompatible conditions are said to stand side by side in our experience of Jesus-sorrow and joy. Believe me when I tell you this is not merely poetic license or linguistic puzzles meant to scramble our thinking. This is a statement about the way things really are and how we experience life as Christian people. The evangelist we call John is a master at presenting us with layers of truth wrapped in paradox and contradictions. “In a little while you will see me no more, and in a little while you will see me”, and “your hearts will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned to joy” on the surface seem like double-talk, but they point to the undeniable fact that true and authentic faith must take widely divergent experiences as the ground on which we live daily.

“In a little while you will not see me and you will lament” was spoken as preparation for a difficult reality. There comes a time in this world and for each of us when it is the absence of God that we sense, and sometimes darkly and deeply. For John it is time between the death of Jesus and his resurrection; that period of not knowing what is to happen next while knowing that what has happened seems tragic and is marked by pain. Remember, this is from Jesus’ Farewell Discourse. Something is coming to an end, and a not so pleasant one at that! The moment is coming when the Jesus the disciples have known and loved will not be seen, nor the effects of his life with them. The world will discount Him and those who follow him. The end they see will seem final.

These past weeks in our country have been a time marked by tragic, earth-shaking events, and heroic human efforts side by side. An individual in Canada inexplicably took the lives of 16 people. We are all watching a force of nature that brings us a clear picture of what it means to not have mastery over all things! The results of these events will be recalled and felt among us for years to come. Even if we could give adequate and clear explanations as to **why**, the lamenting would not be removed. And in the turmoil of the unexplainable there lurks the question: Where is God? “In a little while you will not see me” suddenly seems a little too real and a lot too troubling. I am reminded of the lyrics of Gordon Lightfoot’s song, The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald: “Does anyone know where the love of God goes, when the waves turn the minutes to hours?”

Without a doubt many of you gathered here today could add your own stories of events and

episodes that have entered the stream of life and taken away joy and comfort. A spouse suffers with dementia and days become years where increasing absence replaces presence. A child or friend meets a tragic end far too soon and you are left to go on pondering what to do with your own sorrow and grief. I must confess that there are times when I hear words like those spoken by our Lord today and I think to myself, “That is true; but I wish it were not”. There is from time to time a sense of absence and loneliness before God where sorrow feels like a very real companion. BUT, that is only half of the story.

Recall please John is telling us this is the experience we have “between the times”; before God is finished. We have to look not only at the present, but also the future. John and Jesus knew full well there would come a period when people would come to faith having never seen what the disciples had seen, and yet they their lives would be no less impacted by God’s saving actions. John is telling us that “simply seeing is not believing”. WE are being asked to look beyond and behind our sense of loss to something more lasting, and which takes in all our hurt and holds it when we cannot. We are being told to look at this moment in light of the death and resurrection of Christ, so that even when grief is deep we throw ourselves on God’s final action for all creation. I want you to notice a subtle but absolutely essential switch in the language of this passage. Throughout the text Jesus has said, “In a little while you will not see me”; a reflection of the condition we have identified. But then he changes to one new phrase; “**But I will see you**...” What is that about? We often say, “It isn’t what you know, but who you know that counts”, but here the implication is, “It isn’t who you see, but who sees you” that matters. The tables are turned and it is what God has done in the resurrection that becomes the perspective by which we see our lives, tragedies, and hopes. We see life from a new condition—that Christ claims us even when we do not know what steps to take next. To be seen is to be loved beyond measure.

Most of you here will recognize the date of June 6, 1944 as D-Day. Allied troops stormed the beaches at Normandy and began the final push to defeat the Nazi war machine holding the world in its grip. Though no one knew it at the time the end was set at that moment for the war. It was not until May 8, 1945, VE-Day that things came to an end. People continued to fight and die, struggle and move, but June 6<sup>th</sup> accomplished the goal. Our lives are similar. The final declaration will be in the future so we struggle on, but we do so in light of an already accomplished fact in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And believing that accomplished fact is where joy is found. “I will see you again” is the proclamation/announcement that the end is already decided, and that must be added to our view of all we encounter. HE knows us—that is what matters.

David Redding tells of having a big, black Scottish shepherd as a pet when he was growing up on a farm in the country. He named the dog Teddy and they became inseparable companions. Teddy would wait on him to come home from school at the bus stop. Teddy slept at the foot of his bed. Teddy came whenever David whistled a tune. During the night, no one could get within a half mile of their farm without Teddy’s permission. The boy and his dog were inseparable. Then World War II came and David went away to war. He told his family good-bye, but there was no way to tell a dog you were going away and might never come back.

David Redding went away to boot camp and then was shipped overseas for three years.

Finally, the day came when he could go home. The last bus stop was 14 miles from the farm and his parents didn't have a phone. He simply threw his duffle bag over his shoulder and started walking. It must have been two o'clock in the morning as he neared the farm. It was pitch dark, but he knew every step of the way. Suddenly, the dog heard someone on the road and began to bark. David said, "I whistled only once and Teddy stopped barking. There was a yelp of recognition, and I knew that a big, black dog was running toward me in the darkness. Almost immediately, he was there and in my arms. He knew me. He recognized me. He loved me. Even after three years, he recognized me and loved me."

Whenever there is recognition of love, there is joy. Joy is different from happiness, the great American pastime. Happiness is very much dependent on the actual state of things around and happening to us in the moment. It is conditional on the way the wind blows. But joy, joy is a deeper experience. It is rooted in belonging to God regardless of the temporal events around us. Unlike happiness its' roots are deep, because the source is love. It is being known, being seen, being loved, not because we deserve it, but because Christ seeks us. "I will see you again, and you joy no one will take from you. Amen+