

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

“Just a little while.” Ever had those words spoken to you? Maybe in the back seat of a car, wondering how much longer ‘til you get to Grandma’s house. Or maybe it’s what you heard after asking how long it will be until Dad gets back from his business trip. Or maybe how long until you get to see your loved one in heaven. “A little while.”

In whatever case they’re used, these words are spoken to reassure and to give comfort. That’s why Jesus speaks them to His disciples – and to us. As we wait through the various challenges and trials of this life, we have Jesus’ word that we will only have to wait “a little while.”

Christ gives comfort and reassurance in several ways in His word. The first is His promise and example that He uses all our little whiles for our good. They are all part of His plan.

Consider the first “little while” that took place after Jesus spoke these words to His disciples. Our Gospel reading takes place on the evening of Maundy Thursday, in the upper room after Jesus has instituted His Supper. Jesus tells them, “A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me.”

What events will soon happen that will taken Him from their sight? His Passion! Not long after Jesus says these words, He will lead the disciples out to the Garden of Gethsemane, where a mob led by Judas will seize Him. Most of the disciples will scatter at that point, and even Peter, following into the high priest’s palace, will deny knowing Jesus and leave. Only John will remain, and yet even his view will be cut off at points, as Jesus is hauled back and forth from Herod to Pilate or into the Roman headquarters to be scourged.

And though Jesus will be hung on a cross for all to see, He will then be placed in a tomb, hidden from the sight of everyone. For a little while, they will not see their Lord.

Though this will be a terrible experience, one that will cause much sorrow, as Jesus foretells, it is all part of God’s plan. It is all being done according to His will, and done in order to bring blessing.

This little while, the three days of the Lord’s Passion, takes place so that God may bring about good, the greatest good: the forgiveness of the sins of the world. Christ would be hidden from the eyes of the world in the tomb so that He could take the sins of the world – your sins, my sins, all sins – to the grave and leave them there.

But Christ will not stay there. He’s only in the tomb for a little while. After resting there on Holy Saturday, perfectly keeping the Sabbath for us, Christ will be resurrected, His soul rejoined to His perfected body.

In this body He’ll actually descend into hell, where, as St. Peter records for us, “He went and preached to the spirits in prison.” He will show all those who refused to believe in His coming, who spoke against His promises, that He is the Lord who has kept His promise. He has crushed the head of

the prince of hell upon the cross. His risen body is visible proof that for those who do believe, life – not death – is the final word.

After declaring His victory in hell, Christ will rise and appear to others who have not seen Him for a little while. He will appear to Mary Magdalene and those other faithful women who went to His tomb expecting a corpse and now find a risen Lord.

He will appear in the midst of His disciples who are hiding in a locked room for fear of the Jews, and He'll grant them His peace. A little while later – specifically a week later – Jesus will appear in that same room, again granting His peace and showing Thomas His hands and His side, that this apostle might not disbelieve, but believe.

Christ's passion would not end in death, but life. As He had said, there was a little while when they didn't see Him, but after that little while they did see Him. The Lord had used this little while to bring about salvation.

In the same way, the Lord uses the little while in our lives to bring about good as well. You all have had plenty of times in your life that have brought you sorrow, times when you couldn't see God or His plan, times when it felt like He was far away, or closed off as in a tomb, or focused elsewhere. There are as many different "little whiles" as there are Christians on the earth.

And very often, as you're in the midst of one of these little whiles, you find yourself like the disciples: not understanding what God is doing. They say to each other, "What is this that He says to us?" and "We do not know what He is talking about." You ask yourself, "Why is God doing this?" or "Why is God letting this happen?" or "I don't understand what is trying to teach me."

Just as Jesus turned the little while of the cross to good even though the disciples didn't understand what He was doing or talking about, He will turn your little whiles to good even when you don't understand what He is doing or why He is doing it. As He promises in His word: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose."

There are many different reasons why the Lord might send you a "little while." He may be disciplining you, letting His rod of punishment fall upon you, letting you suffer the effects of your sin. He doesn't do this randomly or vindictively, though. He tells us in His word: "for the Lord reproves Him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." The Good Shepherd uses His rod, not to senselessly beat His flock, but to bring the straying back to His care.

The Lord may also send a "little while" of sorrow upon you so that you learn to cling to Him all the more. When things are good, it's easy to go chasing after idols and focus on ourselves and our worldly desires. Therefore, the Lord in love often takes these things away. This makes our flesh sorrowful, having idols pulled away, but it strengthens our faith, love, and trust in Jesus, who alone sustains us in this life and the next.

The Lord may also have us endure a little while for the sake of someone else. Remember, Jesus didn't hang on the cross for Himself. No, He endured it for the sake of everyone else, for your sake,

for mine. As a Christian, you may endure suffering or hardship so that the faith which God has worked in you may be seen by someone else and through that be brought to faith in Jesus as well.

These are only a few of the reasons for which God might send us times of the cross and of trial. There are many, many more, known to His perfect wisdom. Yet in each and every one, no matter what it is, no matter how long it lasts, the Lord will turn it to good. Whatever sorrows may come, the Lord will turn them to joy in the end.

That endpoint or final result of joy is the second thing to hear in these words of Jesus. Note again the words of Jesus: “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” Jesus doesn’t say that there will be a period where He’ll be seen, and then a period where He won’t be, and that’s the end. No, it always ends with Him being seen. The sorrow always gives way to joy.

This is important to remember because there isn’t just one “little while.” There is the one made up of Jesus’ death and burial, followed by His resurrection. But remember, Jesus doesn’t appear to His disciples in the upper room on Easter evening and then visibly remain with them forever. No, He appears, gives them His peace, shows them His wounds, eats some food, and then at some point vanishes again. He appears again the following Sunday, again giving peace and also showing Thomas His wounds, but then seems to leave again.

This is the nature of all of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. His appearance to the women, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, to the disciples fishing on the Sea of Tiberias – He always appears, then for a little while is not seen again, until He reappears.

Finally, Jesus gathers His disciples, blesses them, and then ascends into heaven. Yet even as they stand there, gazing up into heaven, two angels appear and tell them that Jesus isn’t gone for good. They will see Him again, descending just as He ascended. It always ends with Jesus dwelling with His people, giving His joy that cannot be taken away.

This is true for us as well. Our lives in this world contain many little whiles, many times of tribulation. Some are very brief, some take much longer. Some are only hours – though very intense hours – while others may take up the majority of our earthly lives. At times it may feel like you’ve gone out of the frying pan and into the fire.

But these little whiles of trouble are not where the Lord leaves His Christians. The only way that sorrow can be your end is if you fall away from the faith. But for those who are and remain joined to Christ, the sorrow will always give way to joy, the strife to peace.

Christ did not stay in the tomb and neither will those who believe in Him. Our Lord will call us out of this life of trouble into the everlasting life of peace in His presence. He will bring us into His Father’s house, and there all the problems and pain and sadness of this life will be forgotten. He will give us perfect joy, and no one will be able to take that joy from us, because no one will be able to take us away from Him.

This is why, for Christians, we can have joy even in the midst of death in this life. To be sure, we have sorrow when our loved ones are called away from us. But we know that, because Christ has made them His own, they have been called to His side, to His heavenly glory.

Christians who die get to experience the fullness of the promises of Scripture, such as we hear of in Revelation. There, we hear that the departed saints “are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Their little whiles of hunger and thirst, scorching heat and tears have been replaced by a forever spent in the complete perfection of God. And after a little while, we will be reunited with them, joined into one heavenly flock, with the Lamb as our eternal Shepherd.

That Shepherd, Jesus, is still with us and watching over us, even as we wait in this little while of earthly life. That’s the third thing we are comforted with in Jesus’ words this morning. Jesus says that there will be times when His disciples won’t see Him and times that they will. At times, He will be hidden from their sight, and other times He will be visible to them.

But He doesn’t say that He won’t see them. He is always watching over them, because He is the God who loves and cares for them. Even when He was parted from them, being separated body from soul in death, He was still watching over them. God the Father, whose love is the Son’s love, was watching over them. The Holy Spirit, whom Jesus had given them, was watching over them.

In the little whiles of Jesus’ passion, and between His resurrection appearances, and after His ascension to the right hand of power, He was always watching over His disciples. He would be with them as they spread His Gospel to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. He would strengthen them to stand before kings and governors. He would preserve them in the faith, even as they were martyred, shedding their blood as a final testimony to Him.

And when the holy angels brought them into the halls of heaven, their beloved teacher, Lord, and God saw them again and told them, “Well done, good and faithful servants,” filling them with joy that has no end.

The Lord Jesus still beholds His Church – sees each and every Christian – still today. At times, He is more visible, such as when He comes to us in visible bread and visible wine, or when His working is accompanied by visible water. Other times, He is hidden from our sight. But He is still very much there.

He, our risen King, guides and directs all things in this world for the sake of His elect. His almighty hand, though invisible, shields us from danger, provides us with our daily bread, picks us up when we fall. He is the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps, who sees every one of the countless sparrows, who has numbered every hair of your head. Every one of your days is in His hands, and when those days draw to a close, He will send His holy angels to bring you into His heavenly house.

As we wait for that day, waiting through the little whiles of this life, we have our Lord Jesus' words to comfort and strengthen us. We know that He will turn every little while to good. We know that those little whiles will end ultimately in joy. And we know that our Lord is always with us, seeing us even when we cannot see Him.

Our Lord is risen, and the day is coming when we will behold Him face to face, and no one will take that joy from us.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!