

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Nine months. Three days. Two millennia. Seventy, or by reason of strength, eighty years. There's quite a bit of difference in the amount of time in those numbers. And yet, from a Biblical perspective, the perspective of God, they all can be considered "a little while." Our Lord, who is the God who guides all things, even time and history itself, sends "little whiles," and, though many times they contain grief, they are always followed by joy that is much, much greater.

Our Gospel lesson takes place on what we now call Maundy Thursday, the day where our Lord instituted His Supper as the fulfillment of the Old Testament Passover. After the meal, Jesus tells His disciples many things and prays for them. Our text is part of those words spoken by Jesus. And the issue at hand begins when Jesus says, "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me."

Immediately, the disciples start to wonder, "What is He talking about? What is this little while? Where is He going? Why won't we see Him?" Jesus gives some description, saying that it will be a time where the disciples at first mourn, but then are given joy. But then He gives an example.

This particular example is a little while that lasts nine months, roughly. Jesus says, "When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world."

The troubles that can come in the time while a mother is expecting a baby can vary quite a bit. Sometimes, it can be nausea and morning sickness so bad that even the words "saltine crackers" make you sick. Sometimes, it's discomfort as the baby decides to exercise by kicking the bladder while trying to get as far up under the ribs as possible – and this usually when mom decides to lay down for bed. And then of course comes the delivery, which can be a very painful and exhausting process.

But what comes out of those nine months of difficulty? A new baby. And few things bring more joy than a brand new little boy or girl. The little pink fingers that curl around your finger. The big eyes that just stare at you. Just how small and precious their little bodies are. And the joy continues for much longer than nine months. You have the first giggle, the first word, the first "I love you." You have the pictures they draw and the hugs they give. And it just keeps going.

What's more, the joy is shared by others. For example, the joy that it brings having children in our congregation. I'm probably a little biased here, as the father to some of them, but having kids in church seems to bring a sense of life and happiness that is pretty hard, perhaps impossible, to find elsewhere.

So with a child, the hardship and grief may have been intense for part of those nine months – the little while – and there will still be some afterwards, but the joy that comes from a new human being being brought into the world lasts for much longer and is much, much greater.

Jesus uses this very familiar illustration to help prepare His disciples for what is coming. He tells them that, “a little while, and you will see me no longer,” and that this will be a period of sadness for them. These words would be fulfilled much sooner than they probably thought.

Jesus had told them that one of them would betray Him, and that happened that very night. There, in Gethsemane, the temple guards led by Judas would seize Him. At that point, most of the disciples would flee, not seeing their Master again until Easter evening. Peter and John would follow, though Peter would deny Christ and end up weeping, just as Jesus had foretold. And even for John, who stayed even to Golgotha, Jesus would be hidden when He was wrapped in burial cloths and sealed in the tomb. There, behind a large rock, guarded by soldiers, Jesus was seen no longer.

The grief would’ve been intense for the disciples. Their Master had been taken from them – or rather, they had abandoned Him. The guilt would’ve been awful. Add to that all the sadness of knowing what the Romans had done to Jesus, and the abruptness with which it all happened, and then the uncertainty of “what are we supposed to do now?”, and the disciples are in a terrible place. How long will they be there? “A little while.”

As Jesus had told them, this little while would last three days. And as Jesus had just told them, this little while was sent for a purpose. Like the nine months for a child to come forth, this little while was where mankind’s salvation was brought forth. All that our Lord Jesus endured, He endured to pay the price for sin and set us free from its bondage. He had to be put into the tomb to perfectly fulfill the Sabbath – His body resting in death while His soul dwelt with His Father in heaven. After being resurrected, body and soul reunited and glorified, Jesus descended into hell to proclaim His victory to those who had rejected Him, to show that death could not hold the Lord of Life.

And then, having done all that, He appeared to Mary Magdalene, calling her by name and letting her know that the little while was ended. That evening, Jesus appeared to His disciples and gave them His peace. It was just as He had told them: “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” Their Lord had risen. He forgave them for all their sins. He showed them His body which would not and could not die again.

No one could take their joy, because no one could take their Lord from them. No one could take His peace from them. No one could take His Spirit from them. No one could take them out of the Father’s hands, nor take away the place that Jesus would go to prepare for them. The little while of three days had been intense, but it had passed, and been replaced with joy that would last forever.

That joy would help the disciples, and those who would come after them, patiently endure through the next little while. Forty days after He had risen, Jesus gathered His disciples on a mountaintop, blessed them, and then was taken up into heaven as they watched. The Ascension marked the beginning of another “little while,” a time when they would not see Jesus as they had previously. It would mark a period of great testing for the followers of Christ.

Shortly after this, the disciples would begin to be arrested and beaten for preaching the name of Jesus. Martyrdom would follow, with eleven of the Twelve giving their final witness to Christ in their own blood. And this would be something that would continue through the ages. Countless men and women have laid down their lives for the sake of Christ. Countless more have suffered. It continues

still today nearly two millennia later, with Christians enduring everything from mockery and insults to hunger and beatings to even death. And this little while and its grief will continue until our Lord's return in glory.

But again, the Lord doesn't send His disciples these crosses for no reason. He has reasons for every single thing that happens, and will turn them all to good, just as He has promised. The big reason, what we are ultimately waiting for in this little while between Christ's Ascension and His return in glory, is actually given to us in Holy Scripture. In Second Peter chapter 2, we read, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

Just like a mother has to wait until the baby is finished growing and can be born, the Church is waiting for the last Christian to be brought into the Kingdom. Whenever that happens, then our Lord will return, resurrect all the dead, and bring His people into the glorious new creation, where we will dwell with Him forever. And there, not only is the time spent in joy a lot longer (because eternity is infinite), but the joy will be perfect, much, much greater than anything we might ever experience in this life.

Confident in her Lord's promises, then, the Church carries out the task that He has given to her, to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching, knowing that each day, each Baptism, each instance of sharing God's word, brings us that much closer to His return. And as we wait, we have His wonderful promise, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

That promise gives us comfort and hope as we wait through the little whiles in our own lives. Our Lord has established the days we have, as Moses writes, "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty." For some, more, more some, less.

And yet, as Moses continues, these days are often difficult: "yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away." In those years are times of hardship, sorrow, difficulty. Sometimes they are short and intense. Sometimes they are long and exhausting. In these little whiles, the grief can make it so that Jesus seems to be gone, hidden from our sight, as He was for the disciples.

But as He has promised, He has not left us. Though we cannot see Him, His Spirit, God the Holy Spirit still dwells within us. The Spirit gives us the strength to bear up under the crosses that we shoulder, and He also gives us the faith to cling to Christ and trust that He is using all things for our good. That faith lets us know that, just as in the little while of the three days, and in the little while between Ascension and the Last Day, our Lord is using the little whiles of our lives for our good and for the good of others.

Everything He sends to us, good and bad (from our perspective) is always sent to draw us and others closer to Him. Every day that He has for us is a day closer to being with Him in glory. Every hour that passes is an hour closer to beholding Him face to face. Every moment is a moment closer to paradise.

And so, my brothers and sisters in Christ, hear the words of Jesus and find the strength and comfort He has placed in them for you. When you face the different “little whiles” in your lives, pick up your Bibles, and turn to John 16, and hear your Lord and God tell you, “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

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