



The Community Faces Pain and Joy

April 4, 2010

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

JOHN 13:21–30; 16:16–24; 20:11–16

PRINTED TEXT:

JOHN 16:16–24; 20:11–16

“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”

—John 16:16

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

JOHN 16:16-24; 20:11-16 (NIV)

16¹⁶"In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."¹⁷Some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?"¹⁸They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."¹⁹Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'?"²⁰I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.²¹A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.²²So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.²³In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

20¹¹but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.¹³They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."¹⁴At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.¹⁵"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

INTRODUCTION**A. A JOURNEY INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN**

A family of Italian traders followed the ancient Silk Road in the thirteenth century all the way to what we now know as Beijing, China. After many years in China, they returned to Italy, where the son wrote a book about their journey. This book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, soon made him famous throughout Europe. Many people were skeptical about his claims, however. The fabulous riches of the Mongol emperor seemed too much to believe. The pictures of daily life in ancient Cathay were just too strange. Who could accept such things?

Other people did believe the stories of Marco Polo. They were excited by the idea of such a journey into the unknown. If someone had actually been there, why not listen to him? Among these believers was Christopher Columbus, who was inspired to seek an ocean route to the riches of the Far East. Among the personal possessions of Columbus was a heavily annotated copy of Marco Polo's book.

When someone can actually tell about a journey into the unknown, we should listen. This is especially true if that journey is one that we all must take. Therefore, when Jesus speaks to his disciples about his upcoming journey into death and beyond, we will do well to listen in.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

The apostles gathered with Jesus in the upper room in Jerusalem. Together they celebrated the Passover, the ancient feast commemorating how God brought his people out of bondage in Egypt (see Exodus 12). In at least two ways the events of that night emphasized a sense of community.

First, they gathered as faithful Jews, members of a nation that was forged out of the trials of slavery and deliverance. Their ancestors had gone to Egypt few in number, but came out 400 years later as a great multitude. They would always look back to their deliverance from Egypt as the time when they became a nation. Second, Jesus and the apostles came to this point in their lives with a strong bond of sharing in a smaller, special community. They had spent three years together. They had come to recognize Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, and they had pledged their lives to him.

It is in this tender setting, however, that Jesus uttered alarming words. He was leaving, and they could not come with him. He was, in fact, going to die. They would mourn his loss and be overcome with sorrow. Jesus promised that there would yet be cause for rejoicing in the future, but how could this be?

I. DISCIPLES' CONFUSION (JOHN 16:16–18)**A. INITIAL SHOCK (v. 16)**

16. "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

Jesus has already warned his disciples that in Jerusalem his enemies will kill him (see Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). But no matter how many times he says it, the disciples do not

seem to be able to accept it (see Mark 9:32). Now Jesus tells them again, in words that are somewhat mysterious.

In a little while, in less than 24 hours, the disciples *will see him no more*. While they will later understand how these words point to his death, for the moment they are unable or unwilling to grasp the meaning. And then *a little while* later, they *will see him*. Although they do not understand it now,

Jesus will conquer the tomb, rise from the dead, and appear to them.

B. ONGOING BEWILDERMENT (vv. 17, 18)

17. Some of his disciples said to one another, “What does he mean by saying, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,’ and ‘Because I am going to the Father?’”

Afraid or ashamed to let Jesus hear them, the *disciples* have a nervous discussion among themselves. *What does he mean?* they ask *one another*. Since they are unable or unwilling to accept the literal intent of Jesus’ words, they can only grope for some other meaning. The disciples seem to have special difficulty with one part of what Jesus says, as they single out the words *because I am going to the Father* (see also John 16:5).

Since we live on this side of the cross, we can understand at least part of Jesus’ words without difficulty: he will be taken from the disciples in death, and then he will be restored to them via resurrection. The words about *going to the Father*, however, still cause some disagreement yet today. Does Jesus mean that he will spend time with the Father during the time his body is buried? Does he mean that he will be in Heaven after his ascension and then return as the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, since that is the same as Jesus dwelling in our hearts according to (as some believe) Ephesians 3:17? Or does he mean that he will be with the Father until the second coming, even though in that case *a little while* turns out to be many centuries? Like other words of Jesus, these have more depth than first meets the eye.

18. They kept asking, “What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.”

The disciples continue to press the point with one another. *What does Jesus mean?* If this unwelcome separation is going to happen in just *a little while*, will Jesus leave

them tonight? tomorrow? When will this unwelcome departure take place? Ultimately they concede that none of them knows what the words mean. This is not the first time they have failed to *understand* what Jesus intends nor will it be the last.

II. JESUS’ PROMISE (JOHN 16:19–24)

A. SORROW LEADS TO JOY (vv. 19, 20)

19. Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, “Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, ‘In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me’?”

Jesus is aware of the uneasy argument that is going on among the disciples. He knows they want to *ask him about* what he said, so he brings their reluctance out into the open. When he repeats his own words from verse 16, he is also repeating back to them their own questions from verse 17.

Jesus subtly identifies the heart of their ignorance and frustration when he asks *Are you asking one another what I meant?* Rather than turning to the one who has the answers, they are asking only each other. This, however, is one of those times when human answers simply are not enough. They will never know the ultimate truth as long as they are merely quizzing one another.

20. “I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.”

Here Jesus states an emphatic truth. The disciples will soon face a tragic, traumatic time. They will *weep* in deep sorrow (as does Mary Magdalene in John 20:11) and will *mourn* (as do the women who watch Jesus go to the cross in Luke 23:27). But *the world*, which means all those who embrace living in their sinful and fallen state, will rejoice. Such people will think they have finally put the troublesome Galilean out of the way.

At that dark hour the disciples will be sorrowful with a deep, crushing *grief*. But then, just when the situation seems hopeless, their *grief* will *turn to joy*. This promise of Jesus echoes the promise of David in Psalm 30:5b.

B. BIRTH PAIN LEADS TO DELIGHT (vv. 21)

21. *“A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.”*

To illustrate his point, Jesus compares the coming crisis with *a woman giving birth* (see also Isaiah 13:8; 21:3; 26:17; Micah 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:3). When *her time has come*, in the final hours of labor that lead to the moment of delivery, she has *pain* and sorrow. But finally the *baby* comes, and the tears of *anguish* turn into tears of *joy*. The mother’s birth pains are swept away by the delight of welcoming her *child* into *the world*.

In the next few hours, the disciples will experience a flood of emotions: confusion, fear, panic, and utter despair. Within moments, Judas will leave to betray Jesus. The others will forsake him in the Garden of Gethsemane. In a courtyard near Jesus’ trial, Peter will deny him and then rush out to weep bitterly. The next day they will watch as Jesus is crucified; he will be dead by late afternoon. Can there possibly be joy after all this?

C. JOY LEADS TO CONFIDENCE (vv. 22–24)

22–24. *“So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”*

The disciples have sorrow at the prospect of losing Jesus. All their hopes of a Messiah and the coming kingdom of God seem about to be destroyed. Other “saviors” have appeared on the scene and have gathered a

following, only to have their efforts come to nothing (see Acts 5:36, 37). Will Jesus turn out to be merely another one of these?

But their *grief* will turn into *joy*, a confident joy that *no one* will be able to *take away* from them. This will happen when Jesus’ words *I will see you again* come true. The disciples will be beaten and persecuted for their testimony of the risen Lord, but their joy and confidence will not be taken from them (see Acts 5:40–42). After Jesus rises from the dead, the community of believers will all share this unquenchable joy. They will proclaim his resurrection with unshakable faith. They will stand against all opposition in victory.

23. *“In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”*

In that day probably refers to the time after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Therefore, they will not be able to ask him anything in person. But in the *name* of Jesus they will have the right to *ask* the *Father* directly. At their request he *will give* them the power to work miracles (compare Acts 3:1–10) and even raise the dead (see Acts 9:36–41).

Decades later, the apostle John will confirm that Christians have the right to go directly to the throne of God in prayer. In 1 John 5:14, 15 he assures us of two wonderful truths: (1) God hears us, and (2) he will grant the requests that are according to his will.

24. *“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”*

The disciples have *not asked for anything* in Jesus’ *name* up to this point. But henceforth they and all other Christians are given the right to approach God using the authority of God’s own Son. *Ask and you will receive* is the blessed promise that attends every prayer (see Matthew 7:7–11).

This is the promise that brings *joy* to God's people.

III. MARY'S DISCOVERY (JOHN 20:11–16)

A. TRAGIC SORROW (v. 11)

11. *But Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb*

Early on Sunday morning, the third day after Jesus' death and burial, *Mary Magdalene* is at *the tomb* (compare Mark 16:1, 2; John 20:1). With eyes brimming with tears, she stoops down to look inside the place where Jesus had been laid. Tombs of the wealthy, such as this one belonging to Joseph of Arimathea, are small rooms carved out of rock (see Luke 23:50–53). Along the walls are low shelves, where dead bodies can be placed. Typically, the entrance to such a tomb is small and low, plugged with a large rock to keep out animal scavengers. With this large stone rolled back (Mark 16:4), Mary is able to peer inside.

B. PUZZLING ENCOUNTER (vv. 12, 13)

12.... *and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.*

Mark 16:5 and Luke 24:4 describe the *angels* as having human appearance, like young men. The angels are sitting on the low stone shelf where *Jesus' body* had previously been placed. An angel sits at either end, *one at the head and the other at the foot*, but there is no corpse between them.

13a. *They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"*

When the angels ask Mary *why* she is weeping, they are implying that there is no need for sorrow. They know that Jesus is risen. But Mary does not yet know this. Neither does she know the angels are more than just young men who are unexpectedly present in the tomb.

13b. *"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."*

She answers the angels' question with what she supposes to be the truth: persons unknown *have taken* away the body of her *Lord*, and she has no idea *where they have put* it. That apparent fact gives her one more reason to weep.

C. JOYFUL RECOGNITION (vv. 14–16)

14–16. *At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.*

After Mary answers the question, she assumes there is no further need to converse with the young men. Perhaps withdrawing from the entrance to the tomb, she turns around and sees *Jesus standing there*. She does not recognize Jesus at first, for one or more reasons: her eyes are full of tears; the dawn is not yet full light; she does not turn completely around to face the man she encounters (see v. 16, below). On top of all that, she has no reason to expect that this person is Jesus. It is even possible that she is divinely prevented from recognizing Jesus, as are the two men on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:16.

15. *"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus addresses Mary with the words of the angels: *Why are you crying?* It seems that everyone here knows good news that Mary does not! The second question is even more to the point: *Who is it you are looking for?*

In her grief and confusion, Mary supposes this man to be *the gardener*. (Who else would be in this area so early?) Moreover, she supposes that he has removed the body and put it elsewhere. (After all, this tomb didn't really belong to Jesus.) If he will just

tell her where he has put the body, she will find a more appropriate place for its burial.

16. Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

A single word jolts *Mary* to reality. When Jesus addresses her by name, she suddenly recognizes the familiar sound of that voice. Now she turns around completely to face Jesus, exclaiming *Rabboni*. This is a variant form of *rabbi*, a Hebrew title of honor that means “great teacher” or “one who is

distinguished by great knowledge.” *Mary* now shows both that she recognizes who Jesus is and that she honors him as her teacher.

Mary’s joyful discovery is the discovery of all Christians. She meets the risen Jesus in person; we meet the risen Jesus in our spirits, and we recognize him for who he really is. We worship him as the Savior who has conquered sin and death. We acknowledge him as our Lord. All the pain and defeat of this life are swallowed up by the joy of his resurrection.

CONCLUSION

A. WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER!

The saddest moments of Jesus’ final day of life involved episodes of solitude and isolation. Judas went off alone from the upper room to betray him. Jesus prayed alone in the garden while his disciples slept. The disciples forsook Jesus, leaving him to face the trials alone. But “aloneness” can be emotional and spiritual as well as physical. Peter was surrounded by people outside a trial of Jesus, but Peter’s denials isolated him. Jesus’ followers shared a common grief at his death, but grief may be intensely isolating as each experiences loss in a personal way. *Mary* did not remain in this state. Just as Jesus promised, sorrow turned to joy! Once *Mary* knew the good news, she could not allow others to remain isolated in their personal grief. So she rushed back to the other believers so they could rejoice together.

B. THE VICTORY OF THE EMPTY TOMB

The disciples in the upper room could not imagine how anything good could come from the absence of Jesus. During and after the crucifixion, they could not imagine how any sorrow that deep could ever turn to joy. Their joy came when Jesus proved that death is not the end. He proved that sin is not a fatal blot, but a stain that is washed away by his blood. He proved that the promises he made would be kept. In the light of the great victory of the empty tomb, God’s people can learn to face pain together. We can learn to put confidence in the promises God gives to us, expectantly ready to share joy together. The hope of resurrection is the promise of shared life in eternity.

LOOKING FOR THE RISEN SON

The word *funeral* sounds morose. Funeral services themselves often reflect (or create) that impression. There was a time within the memory of many older Christians when James H. Filmore’s mournful hymn “We Are Going Down the Valley” was sometimes sung at funerals:

*We are going down the valley one by one,
With our faces tow’rd the setting of the sun;
Down the valley where the mournful cypress grows,
Where the stream of death in silence onward flows.*

But a shift has taken place in recent years in the way Christian funerals are conducted. Today we are likely to conduct a *memorial service* in which the emphasis is on the hope of God's promise for a great resurrection day as the life of the deceased is remembered. There are certainly moist eyes at such services. But there are also joyful testimonies of what the deceased meant to those who remain, those still awaiting their own heavenly reward.

Jesus used the facts of childbirth to illustrate the mixed feelings that are to be experienced. Temporary pain is forgotten with the joy new life brings. Those who love Jesus keep looking for the risen Son even as their own deaths approach.

RECOGNIZING JESUS

A man whom we'll call *David* was walking through the exhibit area of a national Christian convention. Coming toward him was a man with white hair, a salt-and-pepper beard, and a smile on his face. The man said, "Hello, old friend; it's good to see you after all these years."

David couldn't come up with a name, so he glanced at the man's convention badge—that wonderful invention designed for just such moments. Unfortunately, the name on the badge was printed too small. Thus David was forced to say, "I'm sorry, I can't remember your name." The stranger said, "I'm John. We went to college together 30 years ago!"

When Mary failed to recognize Jesus, the problem was not the length of time since she had seen him last. It was not advancing age that had dimmed either her memory or her sight. It was because she was not anticipating Jesus to be alive when she went to his tomb. The world today has a similar problem: many do not believe Jesus has risen from the dead, and they do not expect to see him alive. Our glorious privilege as Christians is to explain not only that Jesus rose from the dead, but also to demonstrate that Jesus is alive within us! A convention badge that says *Christian* on it simply won't do.

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. In what cases, if any, should we take our questions and concerns only to Jesus in prayer and Bible study as opposed to trying to work out a solution with the help of other people?

2. How did your faith help you endure a time of deep grief?

3. Do Jesus' instructions mean that each and every prayer must end with the words *in Jesus' name* in order to be valid? Why, or why not?

4. What are some of the things that may cloud our vision so that we are not fully aware of Christ in our lives? How do we overcome these?

5. In addition to hope for an eternal future in Heaven, what power does Jesus' resurrection give us today for our work on earth?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. In what cases, if any, should we take our questions and concerns only to Jesus in prayer and Bible study as opposed to trying to work out a solution with the help of other people?

If the answer to our problem can be taken straight from the pages of the Bible, then there may be no reason to involve anyone else. But many times we can benefit from drawing on the life experiences, specialized education, Bible knowledge, and fresh perspectives of others. Sometimes God chooses to speak to us through our fellow Christians.

However, we should be careful not to fall into the mistake the disciples made. Rather than turning to the one with the answers, they simply were pooling their ignorance (which should not be confused with group Bible study). Helpful as it may be, the counsel of other people should never be a substitute for time with Jesus in prayer and personal Bible study.

2. How did your faith help you endure a time of deep grief?

Grief may come from many sources, including the death of a loved one, a lengthy illness, a broken relationship, the consequences of sin (one's own or another's), and financial setbacks. We do not have to face these problems alone. Christians are to comfort one another (2 Corinthians 1:3–6; 2:7).

Jesus comforted His disciples by encouraging them to think beyond the immediate pain to the joy that was beyond it. Similarly, Paul reminds us that our afflictions are “but for a moment” and lead to a far greater eternal glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). At the darkest moments of grief, the believer holds on by faith to the promise that God himself will one day wipe all tears from our eyes (Revelation 7:17; 21:4).

3. Do Jesus' instructions mean that each and every prayer must end with the words *in Jesus' name* in order to be valid? Why, or why not?

The words *in Jesus' name* certainly can be a helpful reminder of whom we serve. But based on this verse, some Christians have turned the words *in Jesus' name* into a ritual formula for ending a prayer. As children perhaps we even wondered if our bedtime prayers would be heard if we fell asleep before we said those exact words!

Jesus was not teaching a magical incantation, though. To pray “in Jesus' name” is to pray while covered by His authority. Those who have accepted Him are constantly under the covering of His blood and are authorized to approach God's throne boldly in prayer (Hebrews 4:16; 10:22). This is true whether or not we recognize it verbally in each and every prayer. Even so, it is appropriate to remind ourselves often that Christ is our access to the Father. We can express this in a variety of ways at any point during our conversations with God, not just at the end.

4. What are some of the things that may cloud our vision so that we are not fully aware of Christ in our lives? How do we overcome these?

For a variety of possible reasons, Mary did not recognize the risen Jesus at first. Like Mary, we often find that grief and stress can greatly cloud our perception and make God seem distant even when He is near. Sometimes we have been so affected by a secular worldview that we don't really expect that God has the power to work in dramatic and unusual ways to transform a bad situation rapidly.

We can also see ourselves in Mary's effort to "fix" the situation—she felt that it was up to her to find Jesus' body and bury Him properly, and she thought that it had to be done right away. Our frantic efforts to control a situation may cause us to overlook the fact that God has a solution well in hand, and our job is to watch to see what He will do.

5. In addition to hope for an eternal future in Heaven, what power does Jesus' resurrection give us today for our work on earth?

Jesus' resurrection shows us that His words are true and backed up by the mighty power of the life-giving God. All the power of evil was impotent to keep the Son of God in the grave. Whatever our challenges, sorrows, or temptations may be, we can know that the power of God is immensely greater than anything Satan can throw at us, that all God's promises to us will surely come true. We know that our eternal relationship with God is not something only for the future, but something that we experience today.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we praise you for raising Jesus from the dead. We ask you for greater confidence in the victory that belongs to your people. Please help turn all our pains and sorrows into eternal joy. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.