

John 16:16-24

Easter 4, April 21, 2024
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"A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me." ¹⁷ So some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father?'" ¹⁸ So they were saying, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'? ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. ²⁴ Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

One of the joys of being a parent or a grandparent is getting to play simple, little games with babies. Getting to see them play along and laugh and smile—that's a true joy. And there's a game for babies that we've all played which *seems* to be described in our text. What game does this remind you of? Jesus said, ***"A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me."*** Sounds to me a lot like a game of Peek-a-boo!

According to experts, everywhere in the world parents will play Peek-a-boo with their children. It's a universal game, and it's an important one. That simple game is considered to be a cornerstone in human development. It plays an important role in teaching us that things are *still there* even if you can't see them. It teaches babies that the world is not defined by what you can perceive with your eyes. This principle is called "Object Permanence." That's the idea that objects continue to exist even when they can't be seen, heard, or touched by you.

And infants have to learn this. They have to be taught that mommy and daddy still exist even when they're in another room. It's *not* the end of the world just because they went to the bathroom and shut the door; they'll be right back. So, you play Peek-a-boo, covering your face and then uncovering it. That simple game teaches a child that even when they can't see your face, you are still there.

We've all learned this idea; we all understand that things continue to exist even when you can't see them. And, as they were adults, the disciples understood it too. Yet in our text, Jesus sort of treats the disciples as babies, essentially explaining to them the game of Peek-a-boo. He does so because they needed to be taught that the idea of Object Permanence applies especially to God. And that's a lesson we would also do well to take to heart. At times, we will have sorrow, but that does not mean Jesus has abandoned us, it does not negate what Jesus has done for us, nor does it negate the joy we have through Him. And so, our theme for this morning is:

What to Expect when You're Expecting (Eternal Life)

- I. Expect sin-induced sorrow for a little while
- II. Expect Jesus-birthed joy forever

Life is filled with opposites—sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure—and you see this most readily when raising a small child. One second, a toddler can be running happily down the hall, laughing and giggling, and the very next moment that child might be screaming having tripped and fell. One second a baby might be laughing at mom’s silly faces, the next moment she might start crying, because that’s just what babies do. And this is a theme that runs throughout our text, because we have lives that are *filled* with both sorrow and joy.

If you are **Expecting Eternal Life**, you can **Expect sin-induced sorrow for a little while**. Jesus begins informing the disciples about this in our first verse: **“A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.”** Any idea what He’s referring to? It’s not Peek-a-boo. He says this on the night in which He would be betrayed. He’s in the upper room with His disciples celebrating the Passover. And knowing what comes next, you know exactly what Jesus is referring to. He’s speaking about His death and resurrection. *“A little while, and you won’t see Me (because I will have died and been buried); and again a little while and you will see me (because I will rise to life).”*

He adds onto this idea in verse 20: **“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.”** And we saw this take place on Easter evening. The disciples had been in the upper room, and they’d locked the doors out of fear of the Jews. They were *sorrowful*. But imagine how quickly those feelings dissipated when Jesus suddenly stood among them and showed them His hands and His side and proved that He had risen from the dead! **“A little while and you will see me. . . And your sorrow will turn to joy!”**

But everything wasn’t quite right. Sure, Thomas wasn’t there to join in that joy. But eight days later when Thomas *had* joined them, do you remember the situation? Yet again, they had locked themselves in that upper room—again, as we can assume, out of fear of the Jews. Yes, Christ had risen from the dead! Yes, they had renewed joy! But that didn’t mean that their earthly *trouble* was over. No, they still lived in a sinful world, and so earthly sorrow was still a fearful reality for them.

And we know what that’s like! Just three weeks ago, we celebrated Easter. That was the pinnacle of our church year. And really, it doesn’t get much better than an Easter song service, does it? We had a full church that day, the building was filled with joyful voices, we had guitar accompaniment, and an Easter breakfast. And you can kind of ride on that Easter wave for a while, but it’s not too long before you are reminded that even though Christ *is risen*, we have not yet risen *with* Him. We’re still here! We still suffer, and the world still rejoices when we fail. Even though Christ shed His blood for your sins and rose again to secure your justification, to declare you “not guilty” before God—we’re still here in an evil world with our sinful flesh still clinging to us. And *that* means, we *still* have sorrow.

You know, Joel Osteen and many other televangelists like him proclaim a message of, “God just wants you to be happy.” And so many people eat that message up, because that’s exactly what we *want* God to want. That idea meshes with our natural view of things—that if things are going well, then God is with me and loves me; but if things are *not* going well and my life is full of *sorrow*, then God must have abandoned me and is punishing me. It’s that old difficulty we have with Object Permanence. If we can’t see God in our lives, then we think that He’s just not there for us anymore.

Now, as much as we would love this to be true, “God just wants you to be happy,” that’s not what

Jesus says. He warns the disciples, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful...”*** He was speaking specifically about those three days He would spend in the tomb. The enemies of Christ would spend that weekend celebrating, thinking they had finally done away with the aggravation that was Jesus of Nazareth. Meanwhile, the followers of Jesus would weep such bitter tears, thinking everything had gone to ruin.

And Jesus has warned us about the sorrow that will fill our lives as well. He said in the previous chapter, ***“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”*** (John 15:19-20) He repeats it again in the verses after our text, ***“In the world you will have tribulation.”*** (John 16:33a) If you’re **Expecting Eternal Life**, you can **Expect Sin-Induced Sorrow...but it will only last A Little While**. As Jesus finishes that verse, saying, ***“In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”***

No, God doesn’t promise happiness, in fact, He promises sorrow. But it’s sorrow that only lasts a little while, and in *Jesus*, that sorrow gives way to joy. And there’s examples of this throughout Scripture. Think of the rich man and poor Lazarus. In that parable, poor, sorrowful Lazarus spent a “little while” in the company of dogs licking his wounds, but now he rests in Abraham’s bosom. (cf. Luke 16:19-31) Or think of the thief on the cross. He spent a “little while” in sorrow on the cross, but now he enjoys paradise with His Savior. (cf. Luke 23:39-43) The people of Israel were filled with sorrow for a “little while” as captives in Babylon, but their sorrow turned to joy when they were restored to their homeland in Israel. Mary and Martha were filled with sorrow for a “little while” when their brother Lazarus was in the grave. But their sorrow turned to joy when Jesus spoke at his tomb, ***“Lazarus, come out.”*** (cf. John 11:1-43)

And do you see what all these have in common? All of their sin-induced sorrows turn to joy, and it all hinges on Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Lazarus and the thief on the cross enjoy eternal life *due* to Jesus’ victory over death. Mary and Martha saw the greatest of all of Jesus’ signs, the one that foreshadowed *His own* resurrection from the dead. The Children of Israel’s deliverance from captivity is used throughout Scripture as a picture of all Christians being led out of the bondage of this sin-filled world to the joys of our own land of heaven. Yes, their sorrow turned to joy for the *same reason* that the disciples’ would—that Christ would be in the tomb for a “little while,” and then He would rise so their sorrow could turn to joy. That’s why I say that if you’re **Expecting Eternal Life**, you can **Expect sin-induced sorrow for a little while**. . . but you can also **Expect Jesus-birthed joy forever**.

Jesus uses the best illustration to describe this suffering giving way to joy. He says in verse 21, ***“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.”*** A good portion of our congregation can relate to these words much more than I can, since I’ve never given birth. But I have witnessed my wife give birth four times. And each time, I’ve seen someone who, unlike me, has rarely ever let on when she was in any pain, yet I saw her in great pain each time. But I also witnessed as that pain quickly disappeared and turn into joy when she saw the new life that was brought into the world.

Are you in sorrow right now? Is there some great pain in your life leaving you in sorrow? Then I want you to look at the new life which Christ has given you. He says, ***“You have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”*** Yes, Christ is risen, and He promises that we too will rise. We will see Him with our own eyes, and no one can take this from you.

So, when you face some sorrow, call it like it is. Let’s say your personal sorrow is cancer. If you’re struggling through cancer, do not believe that cancer is God’s way of *punishing* you or a sign that He’s not with you. Rather, recognize cancer as simply a sorrowful consequence of sin in this world, just like pain in childbirth. Understanding that, you can turn to Jesus who not only has taken away all your sins, but who also can take away the effects of sin, like cancer and every other form of sorrow. Then you can face it trusting in Him—trusting that Jesus lives, trusting that God delivers His people through death into life, and trusting that God works through all things, even cancer, for those who love Him. And even if you—as the world puts it—“lose your battle with cancer,” you can take heart knowing that Christ is risen and has defeated death for you, and you shall live. You shall be with Him, and you will rejoice in unceasing joy!

But we don’t need to wait until heaven to rejoice. No, like the disciples, we can rejoice right now. Knowing that even though the world throws what it can at us, it cannot take us out of our Savior’s hands. Even though mankind rejoices at our suffering and rebels against God, no one can go back and stop Jesus from dying on the cross; no one can go back and prevent Jesus from rising from the dead. These are accomplished facts, meaning that your reason for joy has also been set in stone. Your sins are forgiven, *your* name is written in the book of life, and you can expect **Jesus-birthed joy forever**.

So, I want you to think again about Peek-a-boo, that game that teaches a child that mommy and daddy are still there, even when you can’t see them. We can’t *see* Jesus right now. And there might be many times in our lives when it seems like He isn’t anywhere at all, or at least not anywhere near us. If that’s ever the case, we need to relearn the lesson of Peek-a-boo, just as Jesus taught it to His disciples.

Even when we cannot *see* God, especially when we are filled with such great sorrow, remember that God is still here. He’s still working on you, and He’s still working to prepare a place for you in heaven. You see, God knows how every good game of Peek-a-boo ends. It goes, “Peek-a-boo, I see you.” And in our relationship with God, that’s really the important thing, that God sees us. He is aware of everything we’re going through, He sees everything we do, yet in Jesus He loves us and forgives us. And He spends every moment of your life interacting with you, even through sorrow, in order to bring you closer to Him. Because of Him, there will come a day of unending joy when you see God face to face, and that day will come in just a little while. Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.