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Easter 5

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Sorrow Turned to Joy”

Text: John 16:12-22; Revelation 21:1-7; Acts 11:1-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

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.

Jesus doesn't try to insulate His disciples from sorrow. He is no helicopter God, trying to spare them any hardship or pain. He doesn't promise them that every day will be sunshine and laughter. You will weep and lament, He says. You will have sorrow. But . . . ***your sorrow will turn into joy.***

Jesus doesn't try to insulate His disciples from sorrow. He takes it head on, and shepherds it. *Good* Shepherds it. He takes it into Himself. To transform it. For that is how their sorrow will turn into joy. In Him.

Yes, they will have sorrow. In just a little while. For Jesus is about to be taken from them. They will sorrow when they see their friend and fellow disciple come and betray Jesus. They will sorrow when they see Jesus bound and arrested. They will sorrow when they fail Him and deny Him. They will sorrow when they see Him condemned. They will sorrow when they see Him carrying His cross through the streets of Jerusalem and out to Golgotha. They will sorrow when they see the nails going through His flesh and the agony of their friend and master and Lord, as He is hoisted up onto the cross. They will sorrow when that mouth that spoke so graciously, so wisely, so truthfully, so compassionately, is silenced. They will sorrow when He bows His head and dies. They will sorrow at His tomb, when it is sealed shut. They will sorrow as they mourn for Him the next day - when they wake up that Sabbath Day and it wasn't just a dream; the nightmare they hoped it was. All that sorrow in just 24-36 hours . . . though it probably seemed a lot longer than that. For that's how it often is with “a little while” . . . when you are sorrowing. A little while can seem to take forever.

But then their ***sorrow was turned to joy***, just as Jesus said. The joy of the empty tomb. The joy of hearing their master's gracious and forgiving voice again. The joy of His peace being given to them. The joy of Thomas putting his finger into an alive Jesus'

hands and side. The joy of the great catch of fish again. The joy of Jesus' ascension. The joy that chased away the sorrow, just as Jesus said. And then this too: this joy, Jesus said, *no one will take from you.*

But *really*? Can that really be true? Because it sure doesn't seem like it. Living in this world so full of sorrow and challenges and struggles - things that rob us of our joy. Is there really a joy that no one can take from us? Think of the ongoing battles with abortion. Some states passing laws to stop it, some to permit it as never before. The lawsuits, the boycotts, the anger and name calling. *Joy?*

There's the continuing battle over religious freedom. Will we be able to continue to preach and practice what we believe? Or will there be threats and punishment and violence because of it? The marriage debate, the sexuality debate, the gender debate . . . *Joy?*

Or what about the division in our country, or maybe even in your home? And then there are financial troubles, ever-increasing demands at work, too much to do, too little time . . . *Joy?* Yeah, four weeks ago, Easter was great. But Jesus, *really?* Joy that no one will take away?

That was the disciples' question, too. They couldn't imagine, couldn't fathom, such joy. And yet there it is. Jesus said it. So either He's wrong . . . or we are the ones who lose it, or give our joy away. For if no one takes it from us, that's the only other option, isn't it? So how do we do that? Lose our joy or give it away?

Well to answer that, we have to know the source of the disciples' joy - what it was that turned their sorrow into joy. **It was Jesus' resurrection**, that He was with them again, and that rising from the dead, He cannot die again; He cannot be taken away again. *And that gave them joy.*

It is His fulfilling all His words and promises, everything that He said He would do for us and for our salvation, He did. It is finished. Signed, sealed, and delivered. *And that gave them joy.*

It is the forgiveness of all our sins. He atoned for, paid for, every single one.

They're all on Him and so they're not on you. All their stupid words, failures, doubting, denial, gone! *And that gave them joy.*

It is His victory over satan, who could not stop Jesus. The promised heel came down on his head and issued a fatal blow. *And that gave them joy.*

Everything that seemed so real and so final to the disciples and that plunged them into sorrow - Jesus' death, the sealed tomb, their horrible sins, the triumph of evil - all was

reversed in a moment, that moment when the Good Shepherd came out the other side of the valley of the shadow of death, *alive!* No one had ever done that before; been able to do that before. But He did! And so now everything is changed. Everything is transformed. Everything is *new*.

And the disciples rejoiced. They rejoiced when they saw Jesus alive. They rejoiced when He forgave their sins; welcomed them back as if nothing had ever happened. They rejoiced when they watched Jesus ascend into heaven. They rejoiced when they were beaten for preaching Jesus. They rejoiced and sang hymns while locked up in prison. Certainly they didn't have problem-free lives of all sunshine and laughter! But it does seem that what Jesus said was true . . . that *no one will take your joy from you*.

So what of us? Was this promise, this reality, only for the eleven and not for us? No. The problem is, then, **when we forget or lose sight of the source of our joy**. When we forget or lose sight of the one who turns our sorrow into joy.

When we forget the one who defeated death, then death looks so fearsome, so final, so victorious. When we forget the one who atoned for our sin, then our sin seems so crushing, so condemning. And the sins of others? Well, *we* have to do something about them! When we forget that satan is slithering around with a deadly heel dent in his head, then we think him more powerful than he is. When we forget our Lord's Word and promises and that He has fulfilled every one, then we doubt and struggle. When we forget His strength, then we see our weakness. And when that happens . . . *joy?* Yeah, it seems really far away.

But just as Jesus changed the disciples' sorrow into joy in just a moment, so He can, and does, for you and me. It's why you come here every Sunday - to renew, to refresh your joy! To hear again, to remember, to lift up your heart to the source of your joy.

You come to hear again the victory and forgiveness of Jesus, as He says to you *I forgive you all your sins*. And they are. All the stupid words, the failures, the doubting and denying of this past week and before that - gone! So they cannot rob you of your joy.

You come to see that font and remember that you are baptized *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, and know that you are a dearly loved child of God. Not because of anything you did, but because of everything He did. Not because you have to earn it or deserve it, but because of His unconditional, unending, love. And what a relief, what a joy, that is to know!

You come to lift up your hearts and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus that once hung on the cross and laid in the tomb but is now risen and living for you. To receive the life you need and the strength you need and the joy you need.

You come to remember His promises fulfilled for you, that no one can take away from you. For the joyful confidence you need.

And so the problems and struggles you face this week . . . you can have joy even in them, like the disciples. For you're not alone and you're not on your own. And you already know who won! And that when you stumble and fall - and you will! - it won't change your Saviour's love for you.

And while your "little while," your waiting for joy and hope and renewal may seem to last an eternity, remember it did for the disciples, too. Those three days of waiting seemed so long, while the forty days after that seemed to go by so quickly. So perhaps it is for you, in this world and life. But the Lord is not only the Lord of sorrow and joy, He is also the Lord of time. For Him, Peter tells us, *a thousand years is like a day, and a day like a thousand years* (2 Peter 3:8). But no matter how long it takes, your Good Shepherd isn't going anywhere. He is here for you. His victory is here for you. And His joy is here for you.

The disciples learned that. They didn't know it when Jesus spoke these words to them, these words that we heard in the Holy Gospel today. *They weren't yet ready to bear it*, Jesus said. That doesn't mean they weren't ready to hear what He had to say, but that they were not yet ready to bear it, to carry it out into the world with them as apostles, sent ones. Not yet. Not until after Jesus' resurrection. Not until after His ascension. Not until after Jesus sends them the Holy Spirit to guide them and strengthen them and joy them. Then they will bear this good news of great joy out into all the world. *Good news of great joy* - remember those words? Those are the words of joy the angels sang at Jesus' birth (Luke 2:10), and now the words of joy the apostles would proclaim once Jesus accomplished His saving work. The *marvelous thing* that He has done.

And then the apostles did go out, and what did they do? Preach? Yes. Baptize? Yes. But through those means, this: **they gave the joy of the Lord**. They turned sorrow into joy. They gave comfort in sadness, hope in the midst of sin, healing for the sick, freedom for the captive, and all in Jesus' name. All pointing to Jesus and His victory over all that plagues us. Joy for the Jew and, as Peter learned, for the Gentile. Joy for the young and the old. Joy for the rich and the poor. Joy for the sinner and the really bad sinner. Joy for those surrounded by friends and for the outcast and lonely. Joy for you and me.

And then on the Last Day, our joy will reach its fullness as John described in Revelation - when the heavenly marriage feast takes place. When *At the Lamb's High Feast We Sing* (LSB #633). The song we have begun to sing now, the song we will sing forever. When finally death will be no more, there will be no more mourning or crying or pain anymore, and those tears that stain your cheeks? Wiped away by the hand of God Himself. **Write this down**, He says, *for these words are trustworthy and true. And he said to me, "It is done!"*

So, is it really true, that we have a joy that no one will take away? It is! It is done. As true as the empty tomb. Because that, and all that it means, is the source of our joy. True joy. Godly joy. Lasting joy.

Or as we'll sing at the end of the service today:

*Let us sing praise to Him with endless joy;
Death's fearful sting He has come to destroy.
Our sin forgiving, alleluia!
Jesus is living, alleluia!* (LSB #466, refrain)

Yes, for *Christ is risen!* [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]
And His victory, and joy, is ours.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.