

## Sorrow Turned to Joy

John 16:16-22

Today, on Easter morning, we are going to discuss a simple question: ***Can (and should) a person have joy in this life?*** Is it possible and is it appropriate for us to have joy when so many things are so wrong in this life?

Most of the people I know are facing some type of huge challenge: health problems, relational problems, serious questions about the future, financial worries, deep regrets about the past, etc. Unfortunately, I think this is the norm: most people have troubles most of the time - even in an affluent culture like ours. Is it possible for us to have joy in the midst of our troubles?

If we look around our city and our country and our world, the amount of suffering is overwhelming. Is it appropriate for us to have joy when there is so much suffering? Can and should we have joy (present tense) in this life?

The reason we're asking this question on Easter morning is because Jesus promised His disciples that their sorrow at the crucifixion would be turned to joy at the resurrection. As we'll see, this didn't mean that their lives would get easier or that all their problems would be solved. And yet Jesus promised them a joy that nobody could take away.

Their experience is a pattern for every single one of us. I believe that God gives this same joy to everybody who really wants it. I'm not saying that it's always easy or that you'll have this type of joy by noon today. But it's available to everybody who wants it.

The past three Sundays we've considered passages in John 14 and 16 in which Jesus addresses the fears of His disciples. Specifically, they were anxious and fearful because He had told them repeatedly that He was "going away to a place [they] could not follow." They couldn't imagine a good future without Jesus physically present with them. Jesus assured them that He would not leave them as orphans; rather, He would come to them in the person of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit would continue to teach them truth and would empower them to do the very same types of works that Jesus had done while with them the past three years.

Today we are going to consider another passage in which Jesus tells them that ***their sorrow would be turned to joy.***

***The Joy of Jesus' Resurrection*** (John 16:16-22; 20:19-20) The events of John 16 took place the night before Jesus was crucified. In verse 16 Jesus makes a statement to His disciples that hints at His resurrection.

16 "A little while, and you will no longer see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me."

Jesus has repeatedly mentioned that the reason they will “no longer see” Him is because He is going to the cross to die for the sins of the world. Here He adds that after “a little while” they would see Him again (see also 14:19). The following narrative makes clear that “a little while” would be only three days; on the third day the disciples would see Him raised bodily from the dead. But this was all very confusing to the disciples:

17 Some of His disciples then said to one another, “What is this thing He is telling us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” 18 So they were saying, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is talking about.”

Jesus was fully aware of their confusion so He proceeds to tell them as much as they could receive at that time.

19 Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, “Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me’?”

Jesus then gives this explanation:

20 “Truly, truly, I say to you, that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will grieve, but your grief will be turned into joy.

The disciples did indeed “weep and lament” when Jesus was arrested (see Luke 22:62), when Jesus’ flesh was ripped open from being flogged, when He was condemned to die, when He was crucified between two criminals, when He cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” and when He breathed His last breath (see Luke 23:49). Jesus pointed out that while the disciples were grieving, the world would be rejoicing: they had solved the problem of Jesus; they were happy because they had gotten rid of this man who threatened the spiritual and political status quo. While the disciples were weeping and lamenting, the world was rejoicing.

But, Jesus assured them, after “a little while” their “grief would be turned into joy.” Jesus then gives an illustration that was rather common in the Hebrew Scriptures - that of a woman in labor. I could never get away with this illustration, but Jesus could:

21 “Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world.

Throughout John “the hour” refers to the hour of Jesus’ crucifixion when He would pay for the sins of the world. Here He says that that “hour” is analogous to the “hour” of a woman’s labor pains. Eventually the pain of labor is overshadowed by the joy of having a child in your arms. The very thing that caused pain would also bring joy. This would be the disciples’ experience also:

22 “Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.

Jesus told them that after the resurrection “your heart will rejoice” and “no one will take your joy away from you.” It’s not that they would never know sorrow again. It’s that something so profound and life-changing will have happened that they would have joy that overshadowed their troubles.

It’s important to note that Jesus wasn’t promising improved circumstances. Things would get much worse for the disciples *in this life*. Almost to a man they would be martyred. Jesus wasn’t promising pleasant circumstances. He was promising something much deeper - a heart-level joy that couldn’t be taken away by anybody or anything.

In John 20 we read the initial fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to His disciples. We read how the disciples’ sorrow turned to joy when Jesus appeared to them after His resurrection. Mary had already reported to the disciples how she had seen Jesus raised from the dead. Beginning in verse 19 we read this:

19 So when it was evening on that day, the first *day* of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, “Peace *be* with you.” 20 And when He had said this, He showed them both His hands and His side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus showed them His scars to prove to them that He didn’t merely look like the person hanging on the cross the previous Friday; He *was one and the same person*. Nails had been pounded through His hands, and a spear had been thrust into His side to confirm that He was dead. In his book *King’s Cross*, Tim Keller talks about the significance of Jesus showing the disciples His scars.

“The last time the disciples saw Jesus, they thought those scars were ruining their lives. The disciples had thought they were on a presidential campaign. They thought that their candidate was going to win and they were going to be in the cabinet, and when they saw the nails going into the hands and the feet and the spear going into the side, they believed those wounds had destroyed their lives. And now Jesus is showing them that in his resurrected body his scars are still there.”

I love the point Keller makes here. Those scars had been the source of the disciples’ sorrows, but now they were the source of their joy. The disciples’ reaction was exactly as Jesus had predicted: they “rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” *Their sorrow was turned to joy*. Certainly there was an emotional element to their joy; there had to be a rush of excitement when they realized that Jesus was raised from the dead. And when we think about our own joy, I don’t think we should minimize the element of emotion. But

their joy wasn't *merely* emotion; it was much, much deeper than that. It would prove to be a deep, abiding satisfaction in their souls that no one could take away from them.

Just to illustrate how they had a joy that no one could take away, consider what happened to the disciples/apostles in Acts 5. They had been arrested for teaching in the temple about Jesus. Actually they were doing the very same works that Jesus did while on earth because the same Spirit that empowered Jesus now dwelled within them.

40 . . . and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. 41 So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name.

The flogging they had just received didn't take away their joy; the "shame" they experienced didn't take away their joy. The fact that Jesus had been raised from the dead gave them a type of joy that physical pain and public shame could not take away. Instead of being despondent or fearful, they "went on their way. . . rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name."

At this point we should ask the question, "Why did Jesus' resurrection give the disciples joy that no one could take away?" Because ***the resurrection validated everything Jesus said and did.*** The last three years with Jesus hadn't been a cruel joke. Everything Jesus had taught about the Kingdom, about the power of loving your enemies, about His identity (the light of the world, the bread of life, the living water, the good shepherd, etc.) was true!

The resurrection confirmed that when Jesus died on the cross, He died as our substitute. He wasn't merely one more guilty person who received the death penalty for His crimes. The resurrection confirmed that He was the sinless Son of God who had died for our sin and that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life.

The resurrection confirmed that everything Jesus had promised about the Holy Spirit was true: The Father ***would*** send them another Helper, the Holy Spirit, who would be with them forever, who would be the personal presence of Jesus in their lives, who would teach them all things, who would continue to draw others to Jesus. The Holy Spirit would give Jesus' followers a joy that nobody could take away.

Some of you may be familiar with the game called Jenga. You begin by stacking up layers of wooden blocks in an overlapping pattern to form a tower. To play the game you take turns removing blocks from somewhere in the stack; you lose the game when you remove a block that causes the rest of the tower to collapse. In the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is like that block. If you remove the resurrection of Jesus Christ from Christianity, the whole thing collapses.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul says that if Christ hasn't been raised from the dead, our faith is worthless and we're still in our sins (15:17). Paul said that if Christ wasn't raised from

the dead, we are the most pitiful people on the planet. The converse is also true: If Jesus **has been raised** from the dead, we're doing the most rational, logical thing in believing in Him and following Him through this life. If Jesus has been raised from the dead and if everything He said is true, joy is the birthright of all who believe in Jesus.

Let me return to the question I asked at the beginning of this message: **Can (and should) a person have joy in this life?** Is it possible and is it responsible to have joy in light of all the suffering in this world and in our lives?

The short answer is "yes" and "yes" because Jesus promised joy and because joy is the fruit of the Spirit. Having joy doesn't mean that you don't take seriously the tragedy you see in your own life, in the lives of those around you, and in the world. Our compassion demands that we care deeply and actively about the suffering around us. Joy means that we are still satisfied in God and His ways. Joy means that something deeper is at work in us and in the world.

Jesus said a fascinating thing in John 15:11. After talking about how those who love Him obey Him (just as He loved and obeyed His Father), Jesus said this:

11 "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

Jesus had joy as He loved and obeyed the Father; they would have joy as they loved and obeyed Him. Joy is the byproduct of discipleship - even costly discipleship. That's exactly what we saw in Acts 5. Peter and the other apostles experienced joy as they followed Jesus at great personal cost. Joy is not the byproduct of living a safe, comfortable life; joy is not the byproduct of taking the path of least resistance. People who play it safe in their walk with God tend to be bored and apathetic when it comes to the things of Jesus.

Let me suggest four things that we need to do; this is a long-term strategy for pursuing joy.

**Desire joy.** You might be thinking, "Who wouldn't want joy? Would anybody really avoid joy and prefer the opposite?" For a variety of reasons, some people honestly don't desire joy.

I was talking with a friend this past week about joy. His comment was that "To have joy is to risk disappointment. To be joyful is to have hope, to believe that life could be enjoyable. . . and when things go back to the same . . . it hurts. Best not to have joy at all. . . then you can't be disappointed." I agree that there's a risk to desiring joy. But the risk is very much worth it because of what joy can do for you and for the lives of those around you. Your influence in the lives of others will be multiplied if you have joy.

**Believe God wants to give you joy.** It's one thing to believe hypothetically that God gives joy; it's quite another to believe that God wants to give YOU joy. If you're a

believer in Jesus, God has put His Spirit within you; and the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, etc. The byproduct of keeping in step with the Spirit is joy.

Don't look at your troubles and try to calculate the probability of somebody in your situation experiencing joy. Since most people have serious troubles most of the time, that won't increase your faith. Rather, look at Jesus and let His word abide in you. Let Him tell you 20 times a day, "These things I tell you so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full." Let the Word give you faith that God wants to give you joy.

If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, I need to let you know that the joy we're talking about today is only available through a relationship with Jesus. I'm not suggesting that if you don't believe in Jesus you won't find any satisfaction in this life. But a joy that nobody can take away comes only from Jesus. This joy comes from knowing that your sin is forgiven and that your relationship with God is whole. The craving in your soul that nothing else can satisfy is a longing for God and for a joy that nobody can take away from you.

The good news is that a relationship with God is free. You need to admit to God, "I've sinned against You and gone my own way. But I believe that Jesus died on the cross for my sin and was raised up on the third day, confirming that everything He said and did was true." You can trust in Jesus here and now. I can't think of a better day than Easter to enter into a relationship with Jesus.

If you check the box on the back of the connections card that says "Beginning a relationship with Jesus." Someone will contact you this week to see if you want to talk.

***Remove hindrances to joy*** (disobedience, unforgiveness, etc).

Joy is the byproduct of discipleship and obedience. When joy is missing, it's often the result of sin. When David finally came clean about his sin with Bathsheeba he prayed, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:12). There may be specific sins from which you need to turn. There may be unhealthy patterns of thinking that you need to replace (which could take some time). Remove any known hindrances to joy.

***Walk with Jesus as fervently as possible.***

Remember how Jesus said that He taught His followers about obedience and discipleship so that His joy might be in them. This is a little bit counter-intuitive. You might think that joy comes from doing what you want to do, not what Jesus wants you to do. My observation is that those who walk most fervently with Jesus experience the most joy. Lukewarm, self-centered people don't experience much satisfaction in their lives.

Since God is so good and satisfying, and since His ways are so wise, if we want joy we need to walk with Him as fervently as possible.