

Cantate
7 May, Anno Domini 2023
St. John 16:5-15

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

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Saints of God,

Perhaps you've found it odd that here in the Easter season, a time of great rejoicing, readings are appointed that speak so much about sorrow. Shouldn't we just be talking about happy things and things that make us feel good? Jesus is alive!

Yes! And that is somewhat the point. Jesus is alive and that glorious reality should change our entire outlook on suffering and how we bear up under our suffering. On Maundy Thursday, the hearts of Jesus' disciples were filled with sorrow. They were fixated on their sorrow as though there was nothing else. Jesus was going away and there is nothing about that that could be good. They blinded themselves to the fact that Jesus going to the Father meant His death for our sins and His ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Their sorrow was not good. Their sorrow was despair. It was hopelessness. That is what we know as depression. That is the sorrow that comes when we are only thinking of ourselves and how hard it is for us and turning a blind eye to the goodness and promises of God our Father. This is exactly what we are praying against in the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. There we pray "And lead us not into temptation." And as Dr. Luther explains it, we are praying that "God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice." We pray specifically against despairing of the good that our heavenly Father has promised. Whether you want to call it despair or depression, such denial of what God has promised is sin of which we need to repent and receive His absolution.

That is certainly not to say that all sorrow is bad. The prophet Isaiah tells us that our Lord Himself was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Jesus wept over the death of His dear friend Lazarus and over the unbelief of Jerusalem. But His was a godly sorrow, a sorrow over all that isn't as it should be. Nevertheless it was a sorrow that did not doubt God's faithfulness to His promises. Jesus' sorrow was a

sorrow over sin and death and the horrible things it has done to you. Jesus' sorrow was a sorrow over those who did not want God's mercy and the gift of forgiveness. Jesus' sorrow was not sorrow for Himself or His own suffering. Jesus told the women who wept over Him as He made His way to Golgotha not to weep for Him but to weep over the wickedness of the world and God's judgment against sin. Godly sorrow isn't about feeling sorry for yourself. It is a lament over sin and fallen man's rebellion against God.

Such was not the sorrow of the disciples and very rarely is it ours. They were feeling sorry for themselves. They had stopped up their ears to what Jesus was promising them. They believed they knew what was good and that certainly wasn't suffering, that certainly wasn't Jesus going away. We always think we know best and in our infinite wisdom nothing good can come from our afflictions. We bristle at the smallest annoyances and injustices and we desperately seek to escape our crosses. We imagine that the highest good we can know is a life on earth without affliction or trial. This is how people fall into depression - consciously or unconsciously they curve in on themselves and imagine that their suffering is eternal and that there is no good left for them. This is why there is suicide and assisted suicide - suffering and sorrow become all-powerful idols.

This is precisely why hearing God's Word on a daily basis is so vital for all of us, and why Jesus gently rebukes His disciples to call their attention away from themselves and their little while of sorrow to His promises and the immeasurable good that will result for them and for us all from His going to the Father. Disordered sorrow and depression come from believing nothing more than what you see and feel and are experiencing in the moment - pain, sickness, injustice, corruption, loss. Similarly, anxiety is born of the fear of suffering that might happen in the future.

But our current or even imagined future suffering are not the whole picture of reality. Jesus IS reality. Jesus is what was, what is, and what is to come. Reality can only be found in God's Word. There God holds before us the truth that reaches infinitely higher than the moment. He reminds you that Christ is seated in the heavens, victor over all your suffering. He reminds you again and again that your suffering is only temporary, even if endures the remainder of your earthly life. Your suffering has an end, an eternal end when, one day, you will know nothing but eternal peace and joy. And in that day you will fully understand what Christ promises you now, that through your suffering now, God brings you good far better than you can imagine for yourself. Flooding your heart and mind with these

promises is the only antidote for such sorrow because God's promises are the truth, not your suffering. God's Word tells you the way things actually are.

That is why Jesus says very specifically "I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away." The disciples' sorrow was not the truth. Jesus cuts through the wrong thinking of the disciples and tells them what reality is. It is not better if Jesus stays because without His death there is no forgiveness and the Holy Spirit is not sent to be their Helper and Advocate. Truly, there could be no good for the disciples or for us if Jesus didn't go away, if He indulged their misplaced sorrow, if He fled His own suffering and placated theirs. This is the truth that we need to hear day after day as we are brought into suffering, as our crosses weigh us down, as anxiety and depression and hopelessness threaten to overwhelm us. The suffering of God's children is not punishment sent by God's anger neither is it permanent, neither is it evil. The death and resurrection of Jesus is God's iron-clad guarantee of that truth. Rather, it is permitted to you to bring about good. You can truly and confidently say with the Psalmist "It is good that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes" and "I know, O Lord, that your rules are righteous and that in faithfulness you have afflicted me." (Psalm 119:71, 75)

This is what the Holy Spirit teaches you and confirms in you as He bestows upon you again and again everything that belongs to Jesus: righteousness, life, salvation, peace, hope, and, yes, joy. The Holy Spirit teaches you that everything the world believes and hopes in is exactly wrong because it does not believe in Jesus who rose in triumph from the grave and now sits exalted at the right hand of God Almighty. This is the blessing of weekly hearing the preaching of God's Word and receiving Jesus' Body and Blood frequently. The peace and promises of God are given and sealed to you again and again. You are strengthened and encouraged. You are given fresh eyes to see and faith to bear up. The world and its devil would have you seek to escape your suffering and that the life of pleasure is the good God wants for you. But these are poisonous lies that billow up from the lowest pits of hell. They only lead you to despair and destruction because they rob you of all that Christ has done for you. And that is, likewise the danger of not gathering regularly around God's Word and the Holy Supper. The promises of God grow quieter and quieter in your heart until they are no longer heard, and are no longer a help to you and you are left only with despair because faith dies.

Dear Christian, Christ would not have your heart filled with sorrow. He would have you take comfort in the promises of Holy Baptism which He has sealed by His Blood. He would have you bear your afflictions and troubles with the confidence that your faith is not in vain, your afflictions will not endure, and that

even in the midst of things that look and feel bad, He is working for your good. Return to His Word. Receive there the comfort and help of the Holy Spirit whom He has sent to you from the Father. And expect from your Father good things. Your suffering is not forever. Be assured that though weeping may tarry for the night, joy WILL come because Christ is risen from the dead.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.