



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday April 17<sup>th</sup> 2016 – Easter III,

*“Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.”*

## ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

The disciples, as we've discussed before, were not always the quickest on the uptake when Jesus was recounting prophesies that applied to Him, or indeed of prophesying of His own destiny. Surely, these were godly men (at least they were by now) who sought to serve The Lord, but even their faith was like that which we are called to have; childlike and innocent. That is why they said *“What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith.”* The prophecies of Messiah clearly stated that He would suffer humiliation and death, and that He would rise again. But the disciples didn't quite catch on to what Jesus was saying, so He tried yet again to make Himself clear.

The language that Jesus uses is unmistakable: *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.”* He is attempting to warn them that they will indeed suffer great sorrow, and that they will suffer that sorrow as the world around them rejoices. Imagine the pain the disciples must feel - their friend and Lord, the very Christ of the Old Testament, was going to suffer the worst kind of humiliation and death possible in front of their very eyes. Not only that, but they would have no one but themselves with whom to weep and commiserate - the world would be too busy rejoicing in the death of this supposed blasphemer and heretic, Jesus of Nazareth, to join them in weeping. So He wants them to be prepared for their suffering, but he also

wants to offer them a glimpse of hope, that their sorrow shall be turned into joy.

Now, Jesus was never guilty of idle speech; every syllable He uttered while He walked this earth had a specific purpose, often a number of specific purposes at once - and this time of course was no different. He uses the phrase *“a little while”* seven times in this passage, and He means just that - a little while. He knows that after suffering humiliation and corporeal death, that He will conquer death in three days, and return in His glorified body to minister to them for forty days. And He knows that the net result of that will be His sending of The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, to minister to the disciples and to the world thereafter.

His choice of words here also echos what the Jews referred to as the *“Messianic woes.”* The Messianic woes were the pain that would go hand in hand with the arrival of the Messiah; you can read more about them in Amos, Isaiah, Daniel, Enoch, and other Old Testament and apocryphal books. As I said, these prophetic writings detailed the great suffering, pain, and labor that would coincide with the time of the Messiah. Indeed, what greater suffering and pain could there be than the very death, temporary or not, of the Messiah? Now, Jesus could certainly have used any analogy to describe these times. He could have compared the temporary suffering to a terrible earache at 3 am which passes by morning. Or He could have referenced a tooth in desperate need of a

first-century root canal - I'm sure in a time when dental health was spotty at best, this would have driven the point home fairly well.

Yet He chose instead to say “ *A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.*” The fact is, those “Messianic woes” were often portrayed as birth pangs in the language and poetry of the Old Testament and the Talmud. So our Lord is yet again asserting His Messiahship in no ambiguous terms. And what is the net result of those birth pangs through which a woman goes? The net result of course is a new creation being born into the world, just as His redeeming sacrifice on the cross brings to fruition a new covenant, and the ability of all of us to be a new creation, through His blood.

The passage concludes with Jesus saying, “ *And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.*” Again, Jesus is saying something which appears simple enough, but which requires diving much deeper. Certainly, His intent is to comfort them after warning them that they will suffer deep sorrow, and His promise is good. But this is more than an assurance of mere comfort; this is a prophecy of the Comforter. And **that** is the “*joy no man taketh from you*” - The Holy Spirit, ever present among the Church. The gifts and purpose of The Holy Spirit would span six months of Sundays worth of sermons before we even scratched the surface. In brief though, The Holy Spirit convicts the world of its sin, and transforms us in the eyes of God. He helps us to remember the Word of God, and to lead a godly life. He bestows upon us spiritual gifts and empowers us to be good witnesses. And it is the Holy Spirit that works in our lives to sanctify and purify us, to lead us to our very belief and steward us in that faith.

So when our Lord is speaking the words, “*and your joy no man taketh from you,*” he’s not speaking merely to the twelve. He’s speaking to the twelve million, or twelve billion, or twelve trillion who put their faith in Him and cast their cares and *their* woes on Him. He’s speaking to the whole world, to you and to me. Our incorporation into the mystical body of Christ, and the Holy Spirit daily ministry to us and continual guidance of us is the joy which no man taketh, not only because it is a perpetual joy that does not fade or have diminishing returns, but because it is

a mystical joy which no man, simply put, *has the power* to take from us.

And this ultimately is the thing we have to cling to. The thing is, Christianity never promises us a life free of pain, regardless of what the prosperity ministers and peddlers of other such false gospels may tell you. In fact, we are warned quite explicitly that we will be reviled, that we will suffer pain and tumult and tribulation, and anybody who says differently is selling something; or a is a liar. We will suffer pain, we will suffer loss. People will suffer chronic pain, and chronic illness; sometimes in ways that are evident, sometimes in ways that are silent and which no one sees, such as chronic anxiety and chronic depression. We will experience tragedy and hurt, and the loss of loved ones. That is why it’s critical that we differentiate between this mystical *joy* and our own personal happiness. Indeed, if we mistake John 16 to mean that Jesus is promising us impermeable happiness, then our faith is going to be pretty horribly torpedoed the first time the mechanic calls to tell us that our transmission needs to be rebuilt, or the first time that new puppy destroys the...well, the *everything*.

No, this is not a promise of personal happiness; we will indeed suffer. But Jesus is telling us that our suffering will be turned to joy, and that all these things - these tribulations great and small, these moments of mourning and grief and pain, can and will be redeemed through him. And the “*joy that no man taketh*” is the fact that **we have not been abandoned**. We have not been left here to suffer without cause, and we have not been left here to suffer without help; we have not been left to suffer here on our own.

Yes, our Lord ascended bodily to Heaven, and left His disciples and us here on this mortal coil. But we have been given a gift that no man taketh; we have been given a gift that is ours as long as we and the next generation, and the generations that come after them, are here on this planet. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit of God to guide us and to minister to us. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit of God to direct our actions, to direct our hearts, to correct us when we are in spiritual error, and to comfort us when we are hurting. God is still here with us. Our joy in that fact, that we stand together as a church and as a family, ever stewarded by the Holy Spirit, is the joy that no man taketh away. And if you manage to find a greater joy than that, please tell me where, and find out if they take credit cards. *Amen*.