

**Easter Sunday  
Grief to Joy!  
John 16.17-22, 20.1-23**

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Good morning, beloved church family!  
It's so good to be with you all this morning!  
Good morning beloved kiddos! I've missed you!

What a couple of weeks!

Two weeks ago, Sharon and I had the incredible joy of heading out to San Diego, where I got to perform the wedding of Corrie, our youngest daughter.

**Photo of dancing with Corrie**

Some of you still remember her as the little blonde three year old who hid behind our legs on our first day here. She's grown up a bit since then. Well, needless to say, it was a week of incredible joy and celebration.

Then last week had a very different feel. Starting off with an ambulance ride to the ER with intense back and hip pain, and experiencing continued discomfort and flare ups in the days since, and still a lot of unanswered questions about what exactly is at the source of it, with concerns about things like herniated discs and pinched nerves and impinged hips.

Well, in the middle of all that, I can't tell you how grateful I am for the outpouring of concern from you all, and the blanket of prayers you've tossed over us. Thank you so much.

I'm also so grateful for the way the staff stepped forward this week. Wow. They are so capable and faithful. There wasn't a single moment when I had the least concern about ministry carrying on just fine without me this week.

Thank you, family, and thank you, team.

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This morning we focus on the miracle and wonder of Jesus stepping out of the tomb three days after he was put to death on the cross.

But the place in the story I'd like to start this morning is not with the events that happened on Easter Sunday, when the empty tomb was discovered, and then the risen

Lord was encountered, but with a conversation that happened four days earlier, in the upper room, on the night we call Maundy Thursday.

The night before his death, Jesus gathers with his disciples, and, knowing they would be going on without him, he puts before them an invitation to a life lived in his service.

But the disciples keep getting distracted by his having said that he would be leaving them for a time. He says,

**John 16.20**

Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.

**John 16.21**

A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.

**John 16.22**

So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

When Jesus says to the disciples, “You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy,” clearly he is referring to his coming death and resurrection.

The grief he is talking about is their grief over his death, which will happen the next day. And the joy he is talking about will come three days later, on Sunday morning, when Jesus will rise from the dead and they will see him again.

He is saying, yes, I’m going to be put to death but the story doesn’t end there. I will rise from death. When that happens, the grief that you felt at my death will turn to joy. My resurrection will *reverse* my death, it will undo it, and that will reverse your pain and loss. Your grief will not be the end of the story.

And in fact that’s exactly what happens, as we heard read from chapter 20 of John’s gospel earlier this morning.

Listen again to John’s summary at the end of the day when the risen Jesus comes and stands in the midst of the disciples:

**John 20.19-20**

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were ***overjoyed*** when they saw the Lord.

The one they thought they had lost forever has been returned to them forever. His death was reversed, and they are overjoyed.

The disciples, crushed by their loss, and by the sudden end of the movement they had been part of for the past three years, are now confirmed in their faith, and realize this is just the beginning. Their grief has in fact been turned to joy.

But . . . how do we hear those same words from this side of the resurrection?

So here we sit two thousand years after Jesus promised to turn their grief to joy, and the resurrection is literally ancient history for us.

Do those words have any meaning for us today? When Jesus says our grief will turn to joy, is there any sense in which we can still take that as a promise for us today?

Not, I'm afraid, in the way we might first hope.

I think there is a temptation for all of us to want Jesus to be the wizard who waves his wand over our lives and makes all of its difficulties fall away.

We want him to reverse the circumstances that bring us grief, whatever those might be, just like he did when he rose from the dead. We want him to undo whatever it is that undoes us.

Give me back my parents. Give me back my son. Give me back my friend. Give me back my job. Give me back my health. Give me another shot at the team. Give me another try at the exam. Give me a do-over on that conversation. Give me a do-over on today. Give me a do-over on my marriage. Give me a do-over on my life.

When Jesus promises our grief will turn to joy, it isn't a promise that Jesus will *reverse* the circumstances we don't like, that somehow he'll undo them.

He doesn't promise to remove the things that are difficult from our lives. In fact, Jesus is clear that we need to *expect* grief and trouble and loss to be part of life in a fallen world.

In John 16.33 he says

In this world you will have trouble.

So no. The circumstances that cause us grief, loss, pain, struggle, disappointment: Jesus doesn't promise to reverse those like he reversed his death.

There is a sense of life being like a ratchet wrench, isn't there? A ratchet wrench is a wrench that only tightens in one direction. If you turn it one way, it tightens the bolt's grip. But if you turn it the other way, it refuses to grab the bolt and just spins freely.

That's what the hard parts of life are often like. They come into our lives and then they just lodge there and dig in deeper.

Sure, there are wonderful exceptions. Someone loses a job and then gets a new one. Someone else is diagnosed with cancer and then after treatment is declared cancer free. Two friends go through a painful break and then they're reconciled.

But in general, grief has a permanence to it. Loss tends to be final. Separation is often irrecoverable. And death always has the last word.

Life has a ratchet wrench like quality to it. There is no promise of reversal.

So when Jesus promises that our grief will turn to joy, he isn't promising us that he will step in and *reverse* the circumstances that cause us grief in the first place.

But then we see in John 17 Jesus prayerfully anticipating that the lives his followers, will in fact be marked by joy.

John 17.13

I am coming to you now, [Jesus prays], but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they [meaning us, his followers] may have the full measure of my **joy** within them.

So somehow Jesus's followers, to whom Jesus gives no promise that he will *reverse* their difficult circumstances, can anticipate a life of joy even amid their troubles.

How? What joy can we count on if we can't count on all that is difficult being undone? Is grief being turned to joy just an empty promise now that the resurrection has happened?

Well, no, actually. Even though we can't count on Jesus reversing our difficulties, as his followers we can count on Jesus turning our grief to joy in two remarkable and deeply hopeful ways.

First, though Jesus doesn't promise to reverse our painful circumstances, he does promise to *remain* with us *in* them, which has the effect of transforming them.

And second, though Jesus doesn't promise to reverse our painful circumstances, he does promise to *redeem* them, which has the effect of transforming both them and us.

Let's look at those.

**First, Jesus will be with me in whatever circumstance results in my experiencing pain or grief.**

The risen Lord Jesus will meet me in this.

That promise is captured in Matthew 28.20, where Jesus says,  
Behold, I am always with you.

The word “behold” is like a flashing light on a highway sign. It says, “Hey, notice this! Factor this in! Take this into account as you travel forward from here!”

Jesus says He is with us always! Not fleetingly, not from time to time, not just in the good times, but *always*. He will remain with us always; he will be with us in and through all things.

So he transforms our griefs and our losses and our struggles not by reversing them, not by removing them, but by being with us in them and moving us through them.

I don’t recall who said this, but it is a game-changing way to think about how we pray, “The one prayer we can be confident God will always answer is that God will give us himself.”

One of my favorite scenes in one of my favorite stories is when Frodo, paddling away, says to Sam in the *Lord of the Rings*, “Go back, Sam! I’m going to Mordor alone.” And Sam, wading out into the water after him, says, “Of course you are. And I’m going with you.”

That is the true promise of the resurrection, the promise that makes this promise of grief turning to joy come to life all these years after the first Easter. Your grief will turn to joy means, at least in part, that Jesus will be with you in whatever grief you will ever face.

I just got done reading *Touching the Void*, an amazing true mountain climbing story of two friends who were climbing a rock face in the Andes when one fell and broke his leg. After trying to lower his injured friend down the mountain side he eventually found himself in an impossible place where his friend was hanging over an overhang and unable to move, and he was beginning to lose his footing. Rather than die himself, he cut the rope and let his friend fall.

Jesus will never cut the rope. He is always with us. He will never let us down.

My loss, my struggle, my pain, is transformed into a joy when I know that Jesus is with me in it, bringing me the comfort and strength of his presence, giving me grace sufficient for whatever it is I will face. Because whatever I face, I will never face it alone.

Think about some of the causes of grief and struggle in your own life right now.

What does it mean for you to know that Jesus will be with you in them?

Kids, what would it mean for you to know for sure that there will never be a time in your whole life when you will have to face life alone?

Here's the other startling aspect of his promise for us today. **When Jesus says our grief will turn to joy, while he isn't promising to reverse our griefs, he is promising that he will *redeem* our griefs.**

He may not reverse them – though sometimes, in answer to prayer, to put his glory on display, he will - but he will, always, redeem them.

How do we know that? After Jesus rose from the dead, he ascended to heaven. And in the book of Revelation we're given a glimpse into that realm, and we hear the one seated on the throne say,

Revelation 21.5

Behold, I am making all things new.

Behold! Notice this! Factor this in! Take this into account as you travel forward from here! I am making all things new.

*All* things! Nothing in our lives falls outside of God's redeeming touch. Nothing.

When he rose from the dead, he not only rose to be with us, he rose to rule over us . . . and over every circumstance of our lives. And he is able to order things such that, in his hands, in the alchemy of his grace, all things, including those that cause us pain and grief, are transformed with redemptive purpose.

That's what's behind those seemingly absurd statements in the New Testament – like James 1 and I Peter 1 and Romans 5 – that say we can count it all joy when we go through difficulties. Because, in the hands of Jesus, those painful circumstances are transformed from mere pain and loss into experiences that deepen our faith and grow us in love and make us more like Jesus and draw us closer to him.

In the kingdom of God, nothing goes into the barrels marked "direct to landfill." It all goes into the recycling bin.

Nothing is thrown away. Nothing is lost. Nothing is wasted. In the hands of Jesus, everything we face is transformed into something redemptive. That doesn't mean that it is without pain. But it will never, ever be without purpose.

This takes us back to the words Jesus said in John 16, where he says the pain and grief the disciples feel are actually like birth pangs.

### **John 16.21**

A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.

What a profound image. I was there when Sharon gave birth to each of our kids. I'll never forget how, with our first one, Brandon, at the end of twenty four hours of hard labor, followed by the discomfort of a C-section, all of Sharon's pain fell away as she folded Brandon into her arms for the first time.

Jesus says that, for his followers, all of our griefs and losses and struggles are fruit bearing, life giving. There is no such things as unremitting loss for a follower of Jesus. There is only redemptive loss. Loss that Jesus makes endurable by his abiding presence. And loss that Jesus makes beautiful by his redeeming power.

Think again for a moment of some of the things in your life that cause the greatest pain and grief.

What does it mean for you to know not only that Jesus will remain with you in them, but that Jesus will ultimately redeem them, that he will transform them into holy means in your life, by which he lifts you higher and takes you deeper and draws you nearer, all the while making you more and more like himself?

Kids, what would it mean for you to know that Jesus is always taking what is hard in your life and turning it into something good?

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All of this takes us back to a fascinating detail in John's resurrection account. Some of you have caught on to the fact that whenever John includes an unexpected detail in his gospel account he does so for a reason.

That's certainly true of this one. It comes in the middle of the resurrection account that we heard read at the start of the service.

The story starts, you remember, with Mary Magdalene going to the tomb while it was still dark.

Finding the tomb open, she runs and finds Peter and John, who inspect the tomb and then leave.

Now Mary is left at the tomb alone. As she is crying next to the tomb, the risen Jesus appears to her.

### **John 20.15**

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Mary thinks Jesus is a gardener because, as it says at the end of chapter 19,

John 19.41-42

At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. . . . Since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

I love this! Think about the significance of Jesus being buried in a garden.

When we as human beings think of death, what sort of place comes to mind? A cemetery, a graveyard, a tomb.

But when we are thinking of life, what sort of place captures the idea of life more than a garden!

Gardens have always been symbolic of life at its most beautiful and most bountiful.

One of the most captivating books I read as a kid was *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, which tells the story of a sad orphan confined to her room in her uncle's decrepit old house until she ducks out of the house one day and discovers a hidden garden. I think that story captures all of the associations we have of gardens as places of mystery and life and healing and abundance.

It isn't accidental that the biblical story begins and ends with a garden. There's a garden at the beginning, before sin has stained the world. And there's a garden at the end, once the world has been scrubbed clean of the stain of sin.

And it isn't accidental that the hinge moment of redemptive history, the resurrection, when death is swallowed up in life, also happens in a garden.

Nor is it coincidental that Jesus is mistaken for a gardener. Think how many of his best known parables have to do with soil and plants and trees and fruit and vines and branches, including the one the disciples all heard Jesus speak just a few days before, in John 12: when Jesus said

John 12.23-25

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

Jesus, making all things new, begins by making himself new, rising to life. Then he begins to make us new, raising us to life in his train.

I wrote a little poem about this case of mistaken identity that I call Garden Plot.

Gardener tilling among the tombs  
what do you sow?



The blood of God  
 from the lamb whom  
 this world  
 slaughters

Gardener milling among the blooms  
 what do you grow?

The brood of God  
 his very  
 sons and  
 daughters

I love the painting of this moment by Rembrandt (called Christ and St Mary Magdalen at the Tomb).

It shows a garden in the deep dark of predawn, the feeble light of a lantern on the ground swallowed up by the darkness of a tomb before it, its entrance cave-like, with two shadowy winged figures barely to be glimpsed inside.

Mary is on her knees in grief, the jar of anointing oil on the ground beside her. In her hand she holds a handkerchief with which she's been wiping her eyes

But she is caught at just the moment when Jesus has spoken her name. Her head is turning, her face is wide with wonder, her hands are flying up in joy.

Over her shoulder stands Jesus, a shovel in one hand, wearing a jaunty wide-brimmed hat, ready to get to work, lit from head to toe by the first penetrating beam of sunlight as the sun breaks the horizon at sunrise. He leans over Mary in patient joy, wondering when it will finally dawn on her . . . that He is risen, and that that changes everything.

Jesus stands in the mud and ashes of our lives here on earth, in the midst of all that causes us grief and sadness, and he promises to his followers, Your grief *will* turn to joy.

For behold. I am always with you!

And behold. I am making all things new!