

A group of friends, just short of a dozen, looks around at each other with panicked eyes. No one says anything—they can barely breathe. They can't move either—they're paralyzed with fear. Their heads are still spinning from all they've just been through. The last couple days have been a lot to process, more than anyone could take at one time. They don't know what to do next. All they do know is that their future looks bleak.

After all, their closest friend Josh just died suddenly. It was only the previous night they'd had dinner together. But before they had time to digest their food, they had to digest this horrific news. Josh was gone—never to be with them again. And the gravity of this fact devastated them. Its abruptness left them blindsided. What would they do now without him? An overwhelming feeling of doom came over them.

And as if losing such a close friend like Josh wasn't enough, there were all these eerie events surrounding his death. It was almost as if the whole universe was shaken by such a tragedy. They watched as people they'd known and trusted for years—neighbors, family, members of their church even—started acting crazy. Such people seemed to actually want Josh dead, and were ready to riot in the streets until they got their way. It was also the afternoon when Josh was dying—the sun at its highest point—but oddly enough, it was nowhere to be found, nor was there any light at all for that matter. This great sweeping darkness seemed to come over everything and enveloped them. And when Josh did finally die, such an earthquake tremored that it shook buildings off their foundations and even split rocks in two. For Josh's friends, it sure seemed like the world was coming to an end.

* * * * *

Do you know something about that? Do you know what it's like to be afraid, terrified, out of your skull with fear? Do you also know what it is to have a bleak future, know that feeling of doom, know what it means to have your world come to an end? Maybe right now even, you're just waiting for the next shoe to drop. At any given moment, maybe in the next second, everything you know and love could come to a screeching halt.

It could be a relationship. It could be your health. It could be your comfort and security. Who knows. All that matters is that such instability can make it seem as if it's all over for you.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is giving His disciples a heads up. For them, there's gonna be danger ahead. Right now in John chapter 16, they're sharing the Last Supper together. It's Maundy Thursday, and Jesus wants them to be prepared for when Good Friday hits. So, He's coaching them. Jesus tells them not to be surprised when things get dicey. He needs to go away for "a little while."

"In a little while you will see me no more," Jesus tells them. "Because I'm going to the Father." "And then after a little while you will see me." "You will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy." In other words, "Guys, don't freak out—it'll be okay. Things aren't what they seem." Nails on a cross can't keep a good man down. Death doesn't mean defeat. Funerals aren't forever. "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me." Eventually, Easter Sunday will come.

And then, listen to what Jesus says next—it couldn't be more appropriate for Mother's Day! He compares the grief of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Sunday to a woman in childbirth. "A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come," Jesus says, "but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. 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."

I'll never forget the moments when each of my three children were born. And one reason I'll never forget their births is because *three times* I had to witness my wife go through labor. Never in my life has my heart gone out to someone in such a big way. Watching her in such agony and discomfort tore me up inside, and it drove me nuts that I couldn't do

anything about it. All I wanted was to jump in front of that pain and take it for her, y'know shield her from it. But, of course, that was impossible.

But as difficult as that was, there's an even bigger reason why I'll never forget their births—even more than the pain, I remember the joy. It's the joy of watching these little ones come into the world. The joy of welcoming them into our lives for the first time. The joy of knowing I was a daddy, and would witness the miracle of seeing them grow and mature, of watching their futures unfold, the joy of new possibilities. More than anything, that's what I'll always remember and never forget. Other than my wedding day, it was the purest joy I've ever experienced.

Of course, that's easy for me to say—I didn't actually *have* to undergo the travail of childbirth. My job was pretty easy—as difficult as it was to watch from the sidelines. But, y'know what's amazing—I'm not the only one who remembers the joy more than the pain. In fact, my wife—the brave, strong, courageous woman that she is—to my recollection, I don't remember her mentioning the pain even once. Whenever she talks about the births of our children that *never* comes up. All she ever talks about is the joy of when that newborn infant is placed in her arms, of seeing her child's face for the first time, of forever being called “Momma.” When her baby is born “she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.”

“So it is with you,” Jesus says. “Now is your time of grief, but . . . you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” Whatever it is that has you grieving at the moment, whatever's got you mourning right now . . . joy's just around the corner. And when that joy is yours, no one can ever take it away. That's because this season of the church year reminds us that whenever we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of Good Friday, Easter is on its way. Because even the dead are raised—because a tomb becomes a womb—whatever you or I are facing, it's never an ending . . . but is only a beginning. For a mother in labor, it might feel like it's all over for her, but all of that will give way to a new start. For the disciples, witnessing the crucifixion, it might have looked like the show was over . . . but soon enough it would be opening night for eternal life without end. For you, it might seem like the sun is setting . . . but it's only a matter of time before the breaking of a new dawn.

I've seen it happen again and again. I remember Alicia—a former Open Arms teacher from a few years back. She came to me after receiving some scary news—she didn't know how to handle it. Turns out, she was going to be the center of her Mother's Day celebrations from now on. Alicia was pregnant and, at her stage in life and with her life circumstances, in a lot of ways this felt like her life was coming to an end. Out of fear and desperation to regain control of things, she was contemplating the unthinkable.

Fortunately, God gave me the chance to share with her another way, a better way. The way of life, not death. Yes, things were going to change, but it'd be a good change. And sure enough, it was—I'll never forget the day she brought her baby into the center here. She was grinning from ear to ear, a twinkle in her eyes. Her grieving had given way, as I saw a joy in her that I'd never seen before. And nothing could ever take away her joy. This wasn't the end, but a new beginning for Alicia.

Then, there's Katie. She's a friend of ours we met back in seminary. Her husband's a pastor, one of my classmates. And Katie's trouble is that her Mother's Day celebrations will always be for somebody else. Nobody will ever call her Mom. There's no chance she'll go through the excitement of pregnancy. She'll never know what it's like to hold her own baby for the first time. For her, the ship has sailed on motherhood, and grief is the best word to describe it.

But interestingly enough, there's blessing even in the curse, joy even in grief. Katie would be the first to tell you that this hardship has caused her faith in God to grow. It's even turned her into a writer and a public speaker. Her books and speaking engagements have touched the lives of women just like her. People who suffer alone now find a voice in Katie's. And she's had prayers, hugs, inspiring conversations, even made friends with total strangers she otherwise would've never met. As strange as it sounds, for Katie what had looked like an end has turned out to be a new beginning in her life. And the joy she now has through it all can never be taken away.

Finally, there's Carolyn. I call her Mom. Mother's Day is something she and I will never celebrate together again. Many of you know that I lost my mom a little while back. For obvious reasons, it's been a constant source of grief for me.

05.12.2019
Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 16:16-22

Rev. David V. Miller
Lutheran Church of the Ascension
Atlanta, GA

But even in my grief, there's been a joy. There's the joy of knowing that she's alive and well—more alive even than I am right now. By faith, she's with Jesus—the resurrection and the life—gathered with all the saints around His throne. Even as I speak, she now experiences life to the full—without evil or darkness or mortality in the equation. When a loved one dies, it's easy for those of us left behind to only see an end, but that's not how they see it on the other side—it's more of a beginning without end.

Which means it's not over between her and I. Along with her, I too have the chance to live forever with God. Like He did for my mom, Jesus also took my debt away. There's nothing anymore standing between me and my heavenly home. And that's really the biggest joy, knowing that though there are these few years of separation, she and I will be back together for good. “Now is [my] time of grief, but [when I see Jesus I] will rejoice, and no one will take away [my] joy.”

* * * * *

Josh's friends stuck close together for support. They didn't know where else to turn. It seemed like they were hemmed in on every side. But just as their world seemed to be crashing down around them . . . Just when the end seemed imminent . . . Just when they were bracing for the worst . . . joy walked into the room.

Inexplicably, unexplainably, incomprehensibly that group of friends saw Josh again! No more than two days ago, He was deadlier than a doornail. The world seemed to be ending, everything was falling apart at the seams. Yet, here was their friend—alive, well, glowing even! And looking Him over, finding it was really Him, the group of friends together rejoiced!

Because if Josh was back, well, that's a game changer. It means grief is just the first step to joy. An end is really a start. The pain of this world isn't it, but is God's future contracting its way into our present.

Oh, did I mention that the name Josh, which is short for Joshua, is Yeshua in Hebrew and in Greek is Iesous. Or, as you might say, Jesus.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!