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“What is this ‘little while’ of which he speaks?” (John 16:18).

Acts 18:1-8; John 16:16-20

We recognize the relativity of time in Jesus’ phrase, “In a little while.” To a child waiting for a parent’s attention, it is an eternity, but for secret lovers hoping for a furtive goodbye at a crowded family gathering, it is a glance and a heartbeat. In a fourteen-billion-year universe, a mountain range rises in a little while, but for a Mozart, a synaptic moment can conceive a symphony.

The mystic poet of the fourth Gospel repeats the phrase eight times in a farewell dialogue between Jesus and his anxious disciples to convey the timeless truth they will slowly grasp only when he is gone. Blinded by the light, they will learn his afterimage imprinted on their memories. The lifting up of Jesus, on the cross, from the tomb, ascending into heaven and returning within them at Pentecost, reveals what a real human being with a divine destiny looks like. Christ among us calls us to be the children of God.

So, in the final Gospel the narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is compressed into “a little while,” seen, then unseen, seen again. It cannot be grasped fully because it floods our comprehension. Each generation of believers must, in Eliot’s words, “Redeem the unread vision in the higher dream.” The Ascension of the Lord lifts him up from us so we can see him more clearly and see ourselves in the mirror of time. “Here and now, dear friends, we are God’s children; what we shall be has not yet been disclosed, but we know that when it is disclosed, we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Each of the doctrines we celebrate in the liturgy is about us. Jesus Christ is the older sibling who goes before us, the pioneer of our salvation. The Gospel of divine life is the best kept secret of our faith. Death confounds our faith, but only for a little while. For we shall see him again, and our grief will be turned into joy.

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