

FROM SORROW INTO JOY

John 16:12-22

The Iowa State University men's basketball team was up and down. Surprisingly they remained a top team even after a lot of losses in the Big 12. Then didn't go far in the conference tournament, but got a three seed for the NCAA, but then lost in the second round.

Those of us who have followed Iowa State sports for a while were not surprised. We are used to a team getting our expectations up, then failing. We have learned not to get too excited when a team draws some attention, because we know it won't last. No, it is not like the Cub's fans who are used to always losing, but we don't get our hopes up too high.

Yet there are stories that always make the news about how things go from failure to success. We like stories about how the underdog wins, like a "Rocky" or "Rudy" or the "Miracle on Ice" (1980 U.S. hockey team). We like when the sick person gets well, the little guy sticks it to the crooked bad guy, and the shy girl wins the contest.

But is that what we see in life? Once upon a time Iowa State had a football coach named Gene Chizik who was supposed to shake things up here. He left after a few years to go to Auburn, where he won a national championship. But in the ensuing years it became apparent that quarterback Cam Newton, not Chizik's coaching, won that title as Chizik's team lost, there was a recruiting scandal, and Chizik was fired. Most veterans of the NFL have severe physical problems as a result of the hits they took in football. For everyone who becomes a millionaire entrepreneur, many are in debt or unemployed. And no matter how joyfully our victories are in life, at the end there is sorrow; there is death.

Think of the Presidents of the United States. We all know Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt from Mt. Rushmore. We see faces on our money. But other than what we were forced to memorize in school, who cares about Millard Fillmore or Benjamin Harrison or Warren Harding? Even for us. We may know the names of our great-grandparents, but what about their parents and grandparents?

Jesus said to His disciples on the night before He died, “You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.” It sounds like those “happy stories” in the movies where the good guy saves the girl from the evil villain. But do we see that in life? What does it really matter if we find a cure for cancer when people will still die instead of heart failure? Maybe all our stories should end, “And they lived happily ever after,” but do they?

Jesus promised the disciples that their sorrow would turn into joy. We can certainly see how that promise came true in their near future. They would see Jesus arrested and find out that he had been crucified and buried. Then the news would come that He was alive again. That was too good to be true until Jesus appeared to them and even let them touch Him and watch Him eat food to prove that He was real. They went from the rock bottom to “cloud nine.” But then Jesus ascended into heaven. They had to live their lives without Him physically there. In our student center, we have a clock with the symbols of the apostles around it. Many of those symbols deal with how they died. The up-side-down cross is the symbol for Peter. The X-shaped cross is for his brother Andrew. Three parallel knives represent how Nathaniel was skinned alive. St. James the Lessor’s symbol is the saw that was used to cut him in half. St. Thomas’ symbol has a spear, stone to explain about his death. Though St. James’ symbol is three seashells, we know from Acts that was killed by a sword. How could anyone say that these people “lived happily ever after”?

But Jesus’ resurrection is not just about Him coming back to life. He had brought back to life His friend Lazarus, who later died. But Jesus’ raising was to eternal life. He didn’t die later on. He ascended into heaven. He still lives. And as He lives, He will come again. That is what Jesus meant when He said to the disciples that their sorrow would turn into joy. Any other attempt we make to turn failure into success, defeat into victory, poverty into plenty, sorrow into joy will bottom out, because it will die with us. But Jesus gives us eternal joy. And it is that alone that turns our grief into joy.

Rick Reilly wrote regularly for Sports Illustrated. The magazine has a feature article each month called “Faces in the Crowd.” It recognizes local athletes. Reilly was contacted by an Iowa truck driver named Mark Lemke whose son had been quite a golfer until he was killed at age 19 in a motorcycle accident. Reilly wrote the article. His way of describing how devastating this loss was to Lemke was with these words: “Lemke, 51, is just an ex-jock with a simple life that a motorcycle drove a hole through.”

Several months later Mark Lemke was contacted by a man who introduced himself as Tony Dungy. Lemke thought this must be some kind of joke. Dungy was the coach of the world championship Indianapolis Colts. But the man insisted he was Dungy and told Lemke he called because he read the article. Dungy's own 18-year-old son had hanged himself just days before the Christmas of 2005.

Since then, they have stayed in contact, even when Dungy was busy with football that playoff season. Lemke drove an 18-wheel rig to Miami and met Dungy for the first time before the Superbowl. They hugged. They prayed. They visited. They talked about their loss, but especially they shared their faith. They know that despite their grief, there is joy because Jesus rose from the dead. And they will see their sons when He raises us as well.

God has given us each other like Tony Dungy and Mark Lemke. We can be there to help each other through the sorrows in life. The disciples would see Jesus in just a few days when He rose again. But He was even more talking about when He comes on the last day. Then there will be no more sorrow. And that is what we are here to remind each other of and to share with others. In Jesus we are certain that all our sorrow will turn to joy.