

Glorifying Suffering
Mark 11:1–11; John 12:12–16
Sunday, March 28, 2021 (Palm Sunday)

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, when Jesus triumphantly enters Jerusalem and is hailed by the crowds as the King of Israel. What we see in these scripture readings is a reenactment of the enthroning of a king as they did it in the Old Testament. In the book of 2 Kings, when Jehu is anointed as the new King of Israel, the people spread their cloaks on the road for him to walk on as they proclaim, “Jehu is king!” And here, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, Mark says that the people spread *their* cloaks on the road for *Jesus*, along with palm branches, which were a symbol of victory, like Israel’s national symbol. Jesus rides into town on a donkey, as the prophet Zechariah says, “See, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey.” And the crowd chants, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor King David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!”

They are welcoming Jesus as the king who is going to rule Israel and lead an army that defeats the oppressive Roman Empire. All up until now, his disciples have been asking him, “Lord, is *this* the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel; when you will kick out the Romans and give us our sovereignty back?” And the people are celebrating now because they think *that time has come*. Today is always observed as a triumphant day of celebration and rejoicing at the end of the somber season of Lent. Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, coming to take his rightful place on the throne, to rule and reign and lead them to victory!

Except...that isn’t what happens.

Our scripture readings don't *end* with Jesus taking the throne and taking power. They don't even end with Jesus cleansing the temple, driving out the money changers and the people buying and selling animals for sacrifices, as we always *think* of the story of this day ending. In Mark's gospel Jesus doesn't cleanse the temple until the *next* day, and in John he already did it back in chapter 2, *two years earlier*.

It's funny, I've preached on Palm Sunday every year for 15 years, but I've never preached on *Mark's* account of it, and what he says here really struck me this year. After Jesus rides into town and is greeted by the crowds, Mark says, "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." There's not even anyone *there, in* the temple, because it's *late*. Everything is *done* for the day. Jesus looks around at an empty temple, and then he just leaves. John says his disciples did not even *understand* what had happened that day. Not exactly the triumphant enthroning of a king. Not the jubilant celebration that we're used to hearing about on this day. In fact, it's pretty anticlimactic.

But I think it's something that we can really relate to this year. On a Palm Sunday that doesn't exactly feel like the joyful celebration we had hoped we'd be having by now, we see Christ in the empty temple. It feels quiet and lonely and isolated. I can't tell you how many times I have walked into this space over the past year and looked around and left with a feeling of something missing. And that's not just the *sanctuary*. I think that's been the case for a lot of us in a lot of different places in our lives this year. This sense of looking around and things aren't what we *hoped* they would be – whether it's work, school, family gatherings, losing loved ones.

I imagine the disciples there with Jesus in the temple, and they have just witnessed this exciting, hopeful procession into Jerusalem, and all the expectations they must have had about what Jesus was going to do next. Like, the last three years they have spent with him have all built up to *this*. But the temple's empty, so he just leaves. The disappointment they must have felt. The unfulfilled expectations. The confusion. This feeling of, "Wait, I thought it was supposed to be like *this*..." Maybe that's why John says that the disciples *didn't even understand* these things at first. They didn't understand what was going on, what Jesus was doing. They expected him to be a mighty king that reigns in power, but instead they got something else.

Like those disciples 2,000 years ago, this day this year does not end up meeting our expectations, so perhaps like them, we need to *rethink* exactly what our expectations *are* – of *Jesus*, of *life* and *faith*, of the world around us. Where have we placed our *hope*, and what are we *expecting* from it?

The crowd around Jesus expected him to be a powerful king that raised up an army to defeat their oppressors who had inflicted so much suffering on the people of Israel. As he's riding into town, they are crying out, "Hosanna," which in Hebrew means, "Save us!" They thought that Jesus was going to save them from their suffering. But he doesn't. In fact, in just a few days, Jesus himself is suffering a brutal death at the hands of those same oppressors. Their Messiah, their *king*, in whom they had placed all their hope, suffers and dies. That is *not* how they expected *any* of this to happen.

But, you know, so many times we have those same expectations of Jesus and faith and life. That Jesus will save me from all suffering. That if I just follow Jesus, devote my life to him and do my best to be a good, faithful person, then my life will be blessed and happy and free from

suffering. And when something goes *wrong*, when we are met with challenges and failures and suffering and pain, then what do so many people say? “I must have done something *wrong*. I must not have been *faithful* enough. God must be punishing me for my sin.” We might not be that overt about it, but there is a level at which that kind of thinking is *deeply* at work in us. Good behavior leads to good outcomes, and bad behavior leads to bad outcomes. Faithfulness leads to blessing, and unfaithfulness leads to suffering.

But the thing is, that is *not at all* what the life of Jesus shows us.

In the lectionary – the calendar of assigned scripture readings for each week – today is *Palm* Sunday, but there is also a choice. You can choose the readings that focus on the story of Palm Sunday, Jesus’ triumphant procession into Jerusalem. *Or* you can choose the readings that tell the story of his suffering and death. It’s referred to as *Passion* Sunday. So some churches today will tell the story of Jesus’ triumphant arrival, while other churches will tell the story of his crucifixion. Basically, it’s a choice between celebration and suffering, between glory and gory. But in the life of Jesus, those two things are not so neatly divided.

There’s a line in our reading from John’s gospel today that helps us understand this, and we have focused on the *first* half of it, but not on the *second*. John writes, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.” *When Jesus was glorified*. What John is talking about there is his *crucifixion*. It is on the cross, as he is experiencing suffering and death, that the glory of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. The grace and mercy and forgiveness and love of God is revealed in him. You cannot separate the *glory* of Christ on Palm Sunday from the *suffering* of Christ on Passion Sunday. They are inherently connected.

Because it is only in light of the cross and resurrection that we truly understand what kind of king Christ *is*. That's why his disciples didn't understand it until *later*, until *after* his crucifixion and resurrection. They thought he was going to be *one* kind of king, but Christ is *glorified*, not by taking the throne of worldly power and conquering his enemies. Christ is glorified in his suffering *with* and *for* humanity.

A life of faith is not about *avoiding* suffering. Christ did not do that, and nowhere does he promise that's going to be the case for us. Neither is it about *seeking out* suffering. Christ did not do that, either (he sought out *others* who were suffering, but he didn't seek it out *himself*). A life of faith, lived under the rule and reign of Jesus Christ, is about remaining faithful when suffering comes. Living from a place of *love*, rather than from a place of *anger* or *fear*. *That* is what Christ did, and that is what he calls *us* to.

Peter Rollins is an Irish author and theologian who works a lot with parables. He tells a parable about a mother who lost her child. The woman was so devastated and distraught by what had happened that she couldn't let go of her child. So she went off in search of someone who could bring her child back to life. She traveled all over the land to see doctors, magicians, healers, and wise teachers, but none of them could offer any help.

During her search, though, she heard rumors of a holy man who lived high up in the mountains; a man who possessed great powers. So she went in search of this great holy man, eventually finding him in a tiny little house, high above a village. She told him her story, and when she had finished, the old man thought for a moment and then spoke quietly, with compassion. He said, "I can help you, but in order for me to do the appropriate spell, you will first need to bring me a handful of mustard seeds from the home of someone who has not suffered the pain of loss."

The woman immediately left and traveled throughout the village in search of the home of someone who had never suffered a loss. She knocked on door after door, but she couldn't find a single place. Everyone she talked to had suffered some kind of loss. As she went from house to house, though, she heard the stories of others' suffering, and she slowly began to come to terms with her own, until one day she was able to bury her child and go on with her life.

She wanted someone to *save* her from her suffering. But what she found instead was that she was not *alone* in her suffering. And *that* is what ended up saving her.

We expect Christ to be the mighty king who saves us from suffering. But what we find instead is that Christ suffers *with* us. That we are not left to face the pain and disappointment of life alone. *That* is the kind of king Christ is. He is *in* the empty temple. He is *with us* in our suffering. We might not understand it at first, while we are experiencing it, because we're expecting a different kind of savior. But if we can look at the cross of Christ as God bringing glory out of suffering, then maybe we can start to see what God can do with *ours*. And at the very least, we will know that we are not alone.