

Palm Sunday

April 5, 2009

Scripture: Mark 14:1-15:47

Sermon: “Embracing the Ugly to Find New Life”

Palm Sunday begins our march through what we call Holy Week. It is a week full of spiritual emotions that Christian men and women experience as they move toward the Last Supper, the cross of Good Friday, and the empty tomb of Easter.

From Peter’s proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus and the disciples journeyed to Jerusalem. In the Holy Land, “to go from Jericho to Jerusalem involves a long, hard climb. Jericho is the lowest city on earth, over 800 feet below sea level. Jerusalem, which is only a dozen or so miles away, is nearly 3,000 feet *above* sea level.”<sup>1</sup> The road Jesus traveled went through hot, dry desert all the way to the top of the Mount of Olives and it was there that you began to see real vegetation. It was also the place where you caught your first view of holy Jerusalem. Jesus embraced the ugliness of the journey to bring us new life.

Imagine the excitement that the Jewish pilgrims felt coming south from Galilee. The Jews remembered that they “were coming to the place where the living God had chosen to place his name and his presence; the place where, through the regular daily sacrifices, he assured Israel of forgiveness, of fellowship with himself, of hope for their future. They were coming there to celebrate the great Jewish stories of the past, which were mostly stories of freedom and hope. They would meet with relatives and old friends. There would be singing, prayer,

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 146.

dancing, feasting.”<sup>2</sup> Every pilgrim convoy had a sense of the wonder and excitement that would greet them in Jerusalem.

Over the years, I have truly enjoyed the festivities of Palm Sundays spent in congregations seeking to remember the rejoicing that accompanied Jesus as he entered into Jerusalem long ago. Children marching with palm branches and singing. The liturgy filled with the familiar ring of hosannas. Palm Sunday helps us to break the hold of cold, dark, and harsh Lenten worship, for a brief moment. But, then reality sets in (Holy Week) and we embrace the ugly to find new life.

From my seminary days to the present, I have found great value in the gospel of Mark. I have taught church members that Mark is the gospel to read if you want a good clear understanding of the Christian faith. But when it comes to Mark’s depiction of Jesus in the gospel, we run into a Jesus who solemnly ushers in the reign of God. As the disciples and others gathered to celebrate the Passover and the celebration of Israel’s freedom, “Mark’s Jesus is an enigma—quiet, pensive, tense, withdrawn—a most unkingly monarch riding on a colt, a rich symbol of royalty. Why is Jesus so withdrawn? What is going on behind that stoic gaze? Why is this parade filled with so much pathos?”<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps, we see a hint of what is going on in Jesus’ actions. In Mark 11:11, the gospel writer tells us, “And he [Jesus] 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.” Jesus doesn’t storm into the temple and confront sinfulness according to Mark. No, Mark’s gospel is different from that of Luke and Matthew, for

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, 146.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Andrews, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *The Christian Century*, March 24, 2009, 21.

“he wanders quietly into the temple and looks around. He does a reality check, and then slips away to Bethany. He withdraws to a place away from pressure and danger and decision—a place away from the inevitability of pain and suffering and death.”<sup>4</sup> In Bethany, Jesus is loved, touched and nurtured. In Jerusalem, the priests and scribes plot to kill him and Judas is going to betray him. What’s going on here with this retreat? Is Jesus running away from the truth? Is he recoiling from reality?

And I want to ask you at this juncture between beautiful Palm Sunday and the terror of the rest of Holy Week, what do we do when we look around and perform a reality check in the temples and tension points in our lives? “If we have the courage to really look, to admit the way things are, we will see brokenness and evil, sin and disease, greed and injustice. We will see a bruised and scarred and empty world. This honest seeing will leave us sad, scared, hesitant, tired, in need of a time and a place to withdraw. And yet this seeing and this feeling are important. If we cannot see what needs to die in us, if we cannot put on the cross with Jesus all the darkness and sadness and needs of our lives, then there cannot be new life.”<sup>5</sup>

You are called to examine your lives this week. Jesus did not remain in Bethany, but he went back to Jerusalem. There he broke bread with his disciples, broke his body for the world, tore the curtain of the temple in two—“and irrevocably weds God to the fullness of human pain and suffering.”<sup>6</sup> The reality check that Jesus started in the

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<sup>4</sup> Andrews, 21.

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temple becomes more real through the passion of the cross. We are called to take up our cross and follow Jesus. We cannot avoid the suffering of the cross this week. Instead of running away, Jesus embraced the ugly truth, and the energy of that embrace continues to give birth to new life and hope. You and I are drawn into the mystery of how that happens as we examine and live through the mystery of Christ's suffering (the Passion). If we are to draw close to our Lord and mature spiritually then we must experience the whole ugly truth of it.

What does the cross mean for you? Does it mean pain, prejudice, suffering, hate and punishment? Or, does it mean love, forgiveness, mercy, grace, salvation and rebirth? Seek to uncover the central truth of the gospel this week. We claim as good what the world sees as bad. We believe in a God who can transform the blood of passion into the beauty of passion—and new life has the last word. Let us embrace the ugly so that we may find new life. “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” Amen.