

C Palm Sunday 4.14.19

Luke 19:28-40; 22:7-57

Focus Statement: Jesus saves us today.

So why did we do that? Why did we act out the readings today with no warning, no practice, and no one really knowing what they were doing or where they were supposed to be? It was certainly not the most polished gospel drama, and I'll tell you what we just did went against all of the worship planning suggestions, which stress the need to rehearse these big worship services so that the assembly can enter into the experience without feeling uncomfortable or anxious about what's happening next.

Well friends, there's a method to my madness, because that discomfort was exactly the point. I wanted us to feel just a little bit uncomfortable; I wanted us to feel just a little bit lost. And when I say "us" here, I mean us. I create these things and then I just let them loose in the world, and I have no idea how it is going to develop or be received. I wanted us to feel uncertain, because that is how the disciples felt.

We read this story every year, multiple times a year even, and its always more or less the same. Minor changes, in Matthew Jesus rides both a donkey and a colt in some sort of weird gymnastics, today you may have noticed we had palm fronds, but Luke only talked about coats. But the overarching narrative, Jesus paraded into Jerusalem with great fanfare, he had a meal with his disciples, Judas betrayed him, he was arrested, tried, and crucified, that's true no matter who tells it. We know that pattern of this.

But the disciples didn't. Think about this from their perspective. They'd been traveling with Jesus for a long time now, they'd learned to expect the unexpected. They'd seen him feed multitudes with just some bread and fish, they'd seen him walk on water, they'd seen the blind see, the lame walk, the dead brought back to life. They knew to expect the unexpected from Jesus, but a very hopeful and life-filled unexpected. And the triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the crowds cheering, and the banners waving, and the shouts of praise, "Blessed is the king," to the disciples this seemed like exactly how things ought to play out. Jesus had spoken often in their travels about the Kingdom of God, and now as they entered Jerusalem with all the trappings of an imperial procession, it must have seemed like that promised kingdom was about to come to life. That they were entering into the city to remove Herod and Pilate and the long arm of Roman law and reestablish the Kingdom of Israel as it had been in the old days, with Jesus, the branch of Jesse, the descendant of King David, on the throne. The message was not subtle; the Pharisees saw it too. It's why they came and told Jesus to quiet his followers, they were afraid such an obvious show of force would frighten those in power and lead Herod and Pilate to feel there was no option but to silence the opposition.

If they'd looked closer, if they'd really paid attention, they would have noticed the subtle clues that Jesus had come to reign, but as a very different king. The "warhorse" was a baby donkey, the gathered crowds were peasants entering for the Passover, the coats strewn on the ground were the patched, worn garments of travelers. But they didn't look closer. So when things started to get out of control, they responded in very expected ways. Judas got spooked by the same gathering pressure that had alerted the Pharisees, Peter, James, and

John fell asleep in the garden, Peter denied knowing Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest, and they all drifted away, so that by the time Jesus was crucified, laid in a tomb and buried, it was not his closest disciples who did that work, but Joseph of Arimathea, who'd kept his faith secret.

You hear people say sometimes that if Jesus came back today, no one would recognize him and we'd kill him again. And I think that's true, but not for the reasons I think that sentiment is often said. Often I feel like people say that as a condemnation of this current moment in history, making the argument that we live in a particularly corrupt and unfaithful era that would be uniquely unwilling or unable to recognize the savior in our midst. And don't get me wrong, there's a lot about this current moment in history that I find deeply disturbing and problematic, but I'm just not ready to give us that much credit as to claim that we are, to take a word from the Gospel reading a couple of weeks ago, "worse sinners" than all other times in history.

I think if Jesus came back today this story would play out in the exact same way because this story is a human story. You could set the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in any moment in history, and you would find the same players ready to enter into the drama. There will be a Tiberus, captive to his own demons, a Pilate, ruthless and cruel, a Herod, fearful and power hungry. There will be Judas, caught up in the panic, and Pharisees trying to preserve the status quo. There will be Peter, outwardly boastful and inwardly weak, disciples who quietly fall away, and the few faithful Marys, Mary Magdalenes, and Salomes who stick it out to the end. There will be Josephs of Arimathea, who arrive in the aftermath

to quietly and without fanfare pick up the pieces. These are timeless people; they are timeless characters. They are us.

What we do this week is not remember a historical event, what we do this week is refresh in our minds the story that is always unfolding, the story of Christ's saving work for us.

While it's annoying that Easter skips through the calendar with a rhythm that only makes sense if you have an exacting interest in astronomy, it is helpful because it keeps us from being able to pin a day to the resurrection event, it reminds us that this week is not an anniversary. The early Church did not have a set day of the year to remember Christ's resurrection, but they celebrated Easter every Sunday, because every Sunday when they came together around water and the word, bread and wine, was an opportunity to experience again the saving power of Christ's death and resurrection.

And in a way, we do the same thing. We go a bit more all out at Holy Week, because it would be a lot of ask Tish, Jeff, and Justin to play brass for us every Sunday, but every Sunday is an opportunity to live again the resurrection. To gather around the font and remember we are claimed, to hear the stories and interpret them for our own lives, to come to the table and be fed by Jesus. Easter is not our history, dear people of God, Easter is the lived experience of Christ's love for us today.

So this week I invite you to enter into the story. Come on Thursday, eat a meal with friends, pray in the garden, experience the betrayal. Come Friday to stand by the cross and bear

witness. Come Sunday to marvel at the empty tomb. This old, old story is the new thing  
God is doing. So come and be changed. Amen.