

“Don’t Give Up!”—Biblical Offerings of Hope... *for Eternal Life*

The last of six Lenten sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
March 28, 2021—Lent 6: Palm Sunday

Mark 11:1-11 NIV

¹¹ As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.’”

⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?” ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

¹⁰ “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

In the church season of Lent leading up to Easter, this year I’ve been offering this series called “‘Don’t Give Up!’ – Biblical Offerings of Hope.” This final installment is called “Hope for Eternal Life.”

On the Christian Church’s calendar, this sixth Sunday of the season of Lent is given the special name of Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday begins a week of remembrance, a week Christians have come to call Holy Week. In Holy Week we remember a series of events in the final days and hours of the earthly life of Jesus.

- Palm Sunday recalls the day when Jesus made a ceremonial entrance into Jerusalem, the spiritual and political capital of his Jewish faith.
- On Thursday of that week Jesus convened a going-away meal shared with his disciples, a meal we know as the Last Supper.
- Before that meal Jesus demonstrated what it meant to be a servant-leader. In those days of travel by foot over rocky and dusty roads, washing one’s feet was as common as handwashing is today. Usually guests would have their feet washed by the children of the household or by a servant. But Jesus got on his hands and knees and washed the feet of the very disciples who called him Master and Lord.

- After the meal Jesus told his disciples to remember him every time they ate bread and drank wine – in other words, every day of their lives. Our communion services recall that event.
- Later that same evening Jesus walked down to the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives. There he had an intense time of prayer, asking God for strength to remain obedient to God in the face of temptation to save himself. Then his own disciple Judas betrayed him. Temple security guards and an incited mob captured Jesus and took him to the Temple's Chief Priest. That began an all-nighter of Jesus being questioned by religious and civil authorities, tortured and ridiculed by soldiers.
- By Friday morning he was sentenced to be executed. Not that there was a strong case for conviction; the decision was reached more as a convenience to preserve peace between the civic and religious communities. The powers of the state inflicted their cruelest punishment: death by crucifixion. Within hours, Jesus was dead. A person of influence and affluence who was supportive of Jesus' ministry asked for permission to claim the corpse. Before the sun set on Friday he arranged for Jesus to be buried in a tomb the admirer had just bought for his own family. That was Friday... Good Friday....
- Then Saturday....
- On the third day, Sunday, women who had supported and admired Jesus discovered that his tomb was empty and were told that God had raised Jesus from death to life. *Easter!*

All that began with a modest parade into Jerusalem, riding not a general's magnificent stallion but a laborer's pack animal. The onlookers were the twelve disciples and dozens, perhaps hundreds of admirers and followers, and perhaps some curious onlookers who got swept up in the excitement. But on this Sunday morning in the villages outside of Jerusalem most people were just going about their business. After all, in Jewish culture Sunday was (and still is) a workday, the first day of the business week.

The gospels say that Jesus rode down the steep Mount of Olives and back up Mt. Moriah into the walled city of Jerusalem. He entered the Temple grounds, looked around, and then he and the disciples turned right around and went back to the village of Bethany on the Mount of Olives. There they crashed for the night with friends who lived there.

A lot of churches (including ours) celebrated Palm Sunday by creating a semblance of a parade, perhaps equipping children with palm branches to wave as they march through the church sanctuary and on to their Sunday school classrooms... a good way for children to embody a Bible story.

But we're missing a lot if we believe that Palm Sunday is only about a parade. What began on Palm Sunday continues through the rest of the week ahead. Jesus humbly riding down the Mount of Olives is only "the tip of the iceberg." We risk missing the scope of Christ's actions for our sake if we take a shortcut from Palm Sunday right to Easter Sunday.

If you "hotwire Holy Week" and jump from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, you don't know what Jesus did and what he endured not for his pleasure but for our sake –

the sacrifice he made, the price he paid. Author, pastor and theology professor Richard Lischer warns about hearing and contemplating only part of the story of Holy Week. If people take note of Palm Sunday's celebration parade and go right to the joy of Easter's resurrection news, when they hear the Easter declaration, "Christ is risen!" they very well might respond, "Risen from what?"¹

Not journeying through the events of Holy Week is like hoping to see the beauty of the American landscape by *flying* from coast to coast. You miss the Appalachians, the Great Lakes, the mighty Mississippi, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Sierra Nevada. If we don't make the journey through Holy Week and instead hop from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, how can we fully appreciate what Jesus did for us?

Even as he rode down the Mount of Olives astride a donkey Jesus could envision what lay ahead for him: dread, betrayal, emotional anguish, physical pain, abandonment by his friends, torture, suffering, death. At the height of his physical and emotional pain he even cried out from the cross, quoting Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

How could he face it? Because Jesus is God, God the Son, God in human flesh.

God came in our midst in Jesus to be our savior. The one called the Son of the Most High God, Jesus demonstrated that obedience to God is not misplaced.

Each of us will live lives of successes and failures, joys and sorrows. Our lives will have health and illness, ease and challenge. We will live... and we will die. Jesus died, and we will, too. We hope that our death will not approach the trauma Jesus endured. And when his life came to a close, God was not finished. God raised him to eternal life.

God will not be finished with us, either. God will raise us to eternal life. That is the message of the gospel – the good news. As the Gospel of John so famously assures, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life."²

This week is holy, this day is holy only as it helps us make this spiritual journey through the days ahead. Let us seek to encounter Jesus in the other events that he endured in the week we now call Holy Week. Amen, sisters and brothers, amen.

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¹ "Preaching Holy Week in the middle of a pandemic – again: a conversation between Richard Lischer and William H. Willimon" in *Christian Century*, March 15, 2021 at https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interview/preaching-holy-week-middle-pandemic-again?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=98c51032b8-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2021_1_12_capitol_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-98c51032b8-86152847 accessed 3/16/2021

² John 3:16 Common English Bible