

Palm Sunday

April 5, 2020

Matthew 27

*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. 52 The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"*

Let us Pray:

We cry, Hosanna! Lord, Save us!

Save us from the sin within us.

Save us from the evil around us.

By your Word, rescue us from the power of death.

Amen.

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What an odd day for us who think of Palm Sunday as a time of great crowds. Most years we focus on the parade. We gather ourselves in a throng and wave our palms and imagine ourselves in that crowd in Jerusalem. But this year it feels like we are closer to the second Gospel for the day, the end of Jesus' passion that ends in utter loneliness.

For those of us whose entire lives revolve around gatherings and events – athletes and musicians and actors and fundraisers and yes, pastors – everything has come to an utter halt this year. And we are left in our individual homes trying to put our voices and songs and ideas out there into the ether with no real confidence that anyone is listening.

The speed of how things change on Palm Sunday is dizzying. One day, Jesus is being hailed as a hero as a flash mob gathers around him. The crowd might be yelling Lord save us! But the parade-like atmosphere seems joyous and triumphant. Our hymns and practices on this day usually make us feel like the crowd is a good thing, a sign of how popular he is.

But then, in just a matter of days, the crowds are gone and Jesus is alone. Even his closest friends flee. No one in authority will defend him. The crowd that's left is really just a mob. When given a choice between Jesus' life and that of a known criminal, they choose Barabbas. Even criminals who are actively being executed themselves join in mocking him. And from the cross Jesus cries out with the sense that even his heavenly Father has abandoned him.

The speed used to seem a little unreal to me. But no more surreal than the speed at which we have seen every crowd, every gathering, every fairly normal public event we are used to—all canceled in the past three weeks. The charts of the stock market, the jobless rate, the infection rates – all of these numbers are stunning. And strange. Is it really possible that everything we think of as normal can change so fast?

I know this coming Holy Week will be strange. I hope it will be the strangest of my lifetime. But if having a parade around your living room this morning or waving your palm branch all by your lonesome feels a little hollow and ironic, well, that might be an appropriate experience of the stunning speed at which Jesus lost everything, including his life.

Matthew describes it as earth-shattering. Not once but twice, an earthquake occurs between Good Friday and Easter morning. First, at the moment of his death, the earth quakes and rocks split, as if the whole cosmos is rattling with the wrongness of what has happened. This is not the way things should be.

Which doesn't mean that Jesus thought the status quo was just fine. He had been proclaiming a different kind of dramatic change

Matthew is a book of mountains, and the last high point Jesus occupies is this cross. But this mountain should remind us that he started on a mountain, His last public words echo his first ones:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

Poor in spirit. All too often Christians have heard those words as a sort of command, as if Jesus is shaking his finger and telling us not to get too big for our britches. But in Matthew's gospel it doesn't seem to mean that at all. It means exactly like it sounds – Jesus started his ministry by blessing the people who are struggling. He offers this blessing not to the people who are towers of faith and

always seem to know exactly what God is up to, but exactly to those who are struggling in spirit, struggling to know God's presence. Even for you don't feel very spiritual, especially for you, Jesus says, the kingdom of God, which is the realized presence of God, is available.

And in this moment, Jesus himself has been stripped of everything –not only earthly riches (which he never had) but even that rich confidence that God is with him.

On Palm Sunday we read in this place the story of Jesus' last walk, a tortuous slog to Calvary where he hung on a tree and cried "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." Jesus, who had blessed those who were poor in spirit, seems himself to have entered that pit as well. He struggled for just a few hours, with all of his friends fled away, believing even God had left him, and then gave up his broken spirit.

In the Apostles' Creed we say that Jesus was crucified, died and was buried, but before he rose again, the church professes that he "descended to the dead – but the old translation is stronger – he descended into hell." The ancient tradition says that in those moments between his death and his resurrection, Jesus went even further than miserable suffering and death. He went to the dead and gathered from there all those who time and circumstance had left behind.

If Jesus has been *even to hell*, then surely he claims even those whose pit of despair was deeper than we can ever dig out of. If even Jesus went there, then there truly is nothing that can separate us from God.

Matthew's Gospel is a good one for strange times. There are so many odd details in this story, but none more so than this:

The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

Say what? You don't remember the living dead part of the Gospel of Matthew? Yeah, I usually don't either. It's not something that has usually made much sense, until now. But maybe that's because I've never imagined that the world could be broken apart so quickly.

Along with the earth shattering moment of Jesus death, it's as if time itself gets a little out of sequence, and the resurrection that is coming for all of us breaks into

Good Friday, even before Jesus himself has been raised. For the living, it will take a couple of days for the resurrection to come to light. But for those who are already in the tombs, already outside the community of the city, already beyond hope – for them the poorest of all poor in spirit – new life has already begun.

But don't you wonder what they did in the mean time? While the rest of Friday and Saturday went on, waiting for Easter morning, were these raised dead folks just hanging out there in the graveyard? Biding their time until Jesus was ready to walk out of the tomb? What kind of odd graveside party was going on? What business did they have to finish with one another, maybe, before they were ready to go into Jerusalem and celebrate new life? Did neighbors finally reconcile their old grudges that they'd taken to the grave? Did the differences that used to be so huge between them suddenly seem not so important?

A teacher of mine has suggested that one way to understand this weird part of Matthew is that maybe that's us, out there in the graveyard. We, like Jesus, have been raised to new life in our baptisms, but for most of our lives we live in between the agony of death and the new life God offers. We live in the tombs, because we still haven't figured out resurrection life, and that fear cuts us off from each other and from community.

We are there in the graveyard long before we die because we are afraid; just knowing that we will die, and that those we love will die, sends us to a place outside the city gates, if you will.

We who have been baptized are indeed resurrected because Jesus has joined his life with ours. We know that the story does not end in death and despair. And yet we do find ourselves in between death and new life, waiting for the resurrection.

But we are not alone in this graveyard. We are not alone even as we are shut up in our rooms and our homes, waiting for life to begin again but not sure when that will be.

We have an entire Easter community sitting with us in this place of wrecked graves. And in this graveyard of the resurrected we call the church, what we do in the mean time is speak blessing

What we do in the mean time is speak honestly of our poverty in spirit, and forgive one another;

what we do in the mean time is listen, and pray;

What we do in the mean time is bless one another with words of comfort over phone lines and video calls, with offering gifts to the poorest of the poor, with making face masks and knitting prayer shawls and writing cards.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Brothers and sisters, we can see this as a long wait in the graveyard, longing for that moment when we can all gather together again among the living, celebrating Easter.

But make no mistake about it, the earth-shattering power of the resurrection will not be stopped. And God's blessings will roll to us whether we are ready for them or not.