

PALM SUNDAY

Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ride On to Die

Mark 11:1-11

^{NIV} 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?' tell him, '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!" ¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Have you ever seen a TV commercial or heard an ad on the radio that was so good, so creative, so funny you wanted to tell someone else about it? Then, when you tell someone else about the ad, you realize you don't remember what company the ad was for. You might remember it was some car rental company or pizza place, but you don't remember exactly which one. From that company's perspective that ad was not a success. You may have remembered the ad for its creativity or its punch line, but you missed the real point the ad was trying to make: use this product or shop at this particular store. I think something like that can happen when we look at Palm Sunday. We remember all the external trappings of that day—the palm branches and the donkey—but we forget what it is all about. So let's take a fresh look at what happened that day and see the real message of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.

It certainly was a special day. Of course, this was just the first of a series of special days that made up what we now call Holy Week. The week started for Jesus outside of Jerusalem. Jesus spent the night before Palm Sunday at the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in the town called Bethany. This was not long after the time when Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. In fact, John lets us know that because of this great miracle, many people had gone out to Bethany to see Jesus and Lazarus. Also remember that this is the time of the Passover. This is the one festival of the year when every Jew is required to go to Jerusalem if possible. So the number of people in and around the city was much larger than normal. The atmosphere must have been electric when the word started spreading that the miracle-working Jesus was coming to town.

And what an entrance he made! As Jesus got closer to the city he sent his two disciples on a mission. He told them to find a colt in the village that had never been ridden. This would have been a rare animal. He also told the disciples to simply take this colt and, if anyone asks, let them know

the Lord needed it. It was a leap of faith for those disciples to carry out Jesus' order, but that is exactly what they did. And they found the colt just as he said and they untied it just as he had told them to. As they were bringing Jesus the colt to ride on, they threw their cloaks over the colt. This was a sign of respect for Jesus. They didn't want him to have to come into contact with a dirty animal.

When Jesus gets on this colt, things get very exciting. The crowd of people that had gone to see Jesus in Bethany met up with the crowd of people that was coming out of Jerusalem to see Jesus. To mark this as a special occasion, the people threw their cloaks down on the road in front of Jesus. Some might have been too poor to be able to throw away their cloaks. They went out and cut down branches to throw down before Jesus. This was the Ancient equivalent of rolling out the red carpet.

As if this wasn't enough to mark this as a special day, the people kept shouting out to Jesus. More than likely, it just sounded like a tremendous roar. But in the midst of that noise, certain shouts could be heard. Among them were the ones Mark records for us: "*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!*" These were not mere words of praise for an important person. These were words reserved for the promised Messiah.

Can you imagine the excitement? Can you imagine the adrenaline rushing through their veins as they shouted and praised Jesus? But in the midst of all the excitement, did they really get it? Did they know what this day was all about? Did they know the real reason Jesus was entering Jerusalem? In John's account of Palm Sunday, we find out that the disciples themselves didn't really understand what was happening. John writes: *At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.* It seems hard to believe. How could they not understand? How could they not realize just what was happening as Jesus went entering Jerusalem to accomplish the world's salvation?

It's hard to believe until we realize that we do the same kind of thing. Have you ever been caught up in the external trappings of religion, but missed the main point? This happens again and again. It happens when people come to church just to sit in the pew but not to worship their God. It happens when people see the congregation as group of people to socialize with instead of a group of brothers and sisters in Christ who share a common bond of faith.

This kind of missing the point is certainly a temptation this Holy Week. There are many things different things to see in church on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday—the stripping of the altar, the dimming of the lights. But do we realize that these are all meant to focus our attention on the real reason we gather—to worship our crucified Savior? Think of Easter Sunday morning. Is it all about the outward trappings—the breakfast, the choir, the full church, the family gathering afterwards? These are wonderful things to experience. But we have to realize that they are there for a reason. On Easter Sunday, we are celebrating a miracle—the resurrection of our Lord. It's easy to miss the point. Satan wants to draw us away from the real reason we gather here week after week. And that is why it is so important to keep our focus—to keep our focus on Christ.

That is what Palm Sunday is all about. It's not about the palm branches or the cloaks or the donkey. It's about the one who came riding on that donkey—the Messiah. Why did he come into Jerusalem? He didn't come to win the hearts of the crowds. He didn't come to be praised as a hero. He came to die. Jesus knew this full well. He knew that just as he was fulfilling prophecy that day by riding gently on a colt, the foal of a donkey, there was more prophecy for him to fulfill that week. He knew that he would also fulfill Isaiah's prophecy: *"He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed."*

The people may not have realized, but Jesus knew exactly why he had come to this earth. He knew that it involved suffering and death. Yet he did it anyway. He rode on, knowing full well the pain it would cause him. He did this because he knew that this was the world's only hope for salvation. He did it because he loved you and he loved me.

Let's not forget the central truth of this day. Jesus rode willingly to his death in order to save you. Because of Jesus, your sins are forgiven. All those times you've missed the point and focused on the wrong things in your life, they are washed away in Jesus blood. That is your Savior riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Give him your praise.

And what wonderful opportunities you have to do that in the days and weeks to come. Think of all the ways you can praise God in worship this week. Praise him for the gift of his body and blood in the sacrament on Maundy Thursday. Praise him for his sacrificial death on Good Friday. Praise him for his resurrection from the dead and his guarantee of eternal life to all who believe on Easter Sunday. Don't miss the point. These are more than days on the church calendar. These are opportunities to once again focus on what is truly important.

And don't let it end on Easter Sunday! Let Jesus be the center of your life each and every day of the year. That doesn't mean you need to go out and cut down some tree branches and start waving them around and shouting "Hosanna." It means that you can start evaluating how you can best show to yourself and others that Jesus is your Savior and the reason for your existence. May he be praised in your life this and every week! **Amen.**

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