

Sermon

Don't Lose the Passion Amidst the Palms

Portions adapted from "Palm Or Passion?" by Bruce Ball @ SERmonCentral.Com

Once upon a time, "**Holy Week**," was the most celebrated event of the Christian year. It would begin on **Palm Sunday** with joyous parades and festivals throughout the town as Christians reenacted Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. For the rest of the week, all regular work would cease and courts would close. Passion Plays would be performed in the town square as people took time to rest and think about the life they were living in comparison to Christ's.

Then on **Maundy Thursday** evening, everyone would come to Church to celebrate the Lord's Supper as instituted by Jesus on that night and to renew their vow to *"love one another as Christ has loved us."*

At noon on **Good Friday**, the whole town would again parade to church, this time very somberly, to reflect on Christ's suffering and death in their behalf. Using the **Stations of the Cross**, they would symbolically join with Christ on His final walk through Jerusalem; some even very painfully recreating the crucifixion scene for people to view as they prayed, asking forgiveness for their own sins which forced this death upon Him.

On **Holy Saturday**, people would come to church yet again at sundown to keep vigil, fasting and praying through the night, as they awaited news of Christ's resurrection on Easter Morning.

Then on **Easter Sunday**, sunrise and other joyous worship services throughout the day would commemorate the victory of our risen Lord. People would feast and celebrate. Children and new converts were often baptized and welcomed into the church family. **It was the most joyous day of the year.**

Of course nothing ever goes perfectly. It was during the Dark Ages that remnants from an ancient Roman fertility festival, including **rabbits, eggs** and even the popular name "**Easter**," got blended into Holy Week. Thus, it should not surprise us that in our current secular society, Easter Eggs and Easter Bunnies now dominate most community celebrations.

Well, that was then and this is now. As the world has grown busier, more secular and especially during this pandemic, most Christians have restricted their Church attendance to Sunday's only - if at all - which has basically hollowed out the message of Holy Week.

If we just move from waving palms one Sunday, to singing "*Christ the Lord is Risen Today*" the next, how will we ever learn **WHY** Jesus had to die in the first place. How can we ever personally identify with the suffering He endured in our behalf?

I knew people back in my school days who would read only the first and last chapters in a book and then try and give a book report on it. Oh, they knew full well everything that happened in the beginning and the end, but they missed out on all the important information in the middle. Let's not make that mistake with Holy Week

Modern church strategists thought they would solve this problem by rebranding Palm Sunday as **Passion/Palm Sunday**, leaving the onus on the preacher whether to have a palm parade or speak on our suffering savior.

Such were the questions I wrestled with in deciding the focus for this morning: the glory of the palms or the gloom of the passion? Jesus riding victoriously into Jerusalem or, bruised and beaten, stumbling up Golgotha Hill. So I decided to let Mark tell the story this year.

With some variation, all four Gospel writers record the events of Holy Week. **John's** Gospel focuses on the triumphal entry with palm branches and crowds celebrating Jesus as their coming King. In **Luke's** Gospel, multitudes sing Jesus' praises so loudly that the Pharisees try to silence the crowd. **Matthew's** account records large crowds, both leading and following Jesus into Jerusalem, setting the city in an uproar and causing people to ask, "*who is this?*" **Mark** tells a quieter story.

In Mark's story, the ride into Jerusalem is not as dramatic. The disciples were distracted; many were afraid because of what Jesus had said was to come; others were privately maneuvering to claim the most important positions in His new kingdom.

Mark recorded more of a rag tag parade than a grand processional. People laid cloaks and branches on the road, while the marchers started up a cheer: *blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David.* Mark also records that it was late in the day by the time the parade entered town, so Jesus took a quick look inside the Temple, then He and His disciples left to find evening shelter in a nearby village. In Mark's gospel it is still Palm Sunday, but there is also an undertone of fear and unfinished business.

Mark's account is both "Palm" and "Passion" Sunday. If we are to do justice to the events of long ago, then we need to celebrate this day as such. But, to more fully understand everything that surrounded Jesus and to figure out what to make of all the events, we need to enjoy the parade, but we also need to include the cross. One does us no good, if we don't also understand the other. So, we need to pay as much attention to **Good Friday** as we do to **Palm Sunday**.

We know from all accounts that Good Friday was anything but a peaceful lazy day in the sunshine. Crowds swarmed over the city, shouting in loud and sometimes angry voices. An odor of sweat and blood hung in the air from the countless number of Passover lambs being slaughtered for that evening's meal.

Neither did Good Friday offer anything good for Jesus and His followers. With His arrest, the disciples had fled into hiding. Then throughout the night, Jesus had been shuffled from court to court and beaten several times along the way. Three times before the break of dawn, Peter had denied even knowing Him. By sunrise, Governor Pilate, fearing the crowds and fearing Jesus, had already washed his hands of the affair, turning Jesus over to be flogged then crucified.

So, early Friday morning found the bloodied Jesus walking out of town in a very different kind of parade, led by soldiers and followed by mourners and wailing women. Jesus was already so

weak from the beatings, that the soldiers compelled a passerby – Simon of Cyrene – to carry the heavy crossbeam of wood up a nearby hill to which, by nine in the morning, Jesus was tied and nailed and lifted up on a post to die (Mark 15:25).

Yes, we need to look just as determinedly at the bad as we do at the good, so that we can better appreciate what and why Jesus Christ deliberately chose to endure this kind of suffering and death just for us. He did so because of His great love for us. He did so because it was the only way -- and He was the only person who could trade His life for ours.

Jesus didn't remain aloof to us because of our sin. Rather than keep at a safe distance, He actually left His heavenly home and laid aside His godly glory to walk right up to us and dine with us and witness to us of our need for a savior; which is what He Himself was personally offering not only to us, but to all who thirst for righteousness and who call upon His name.

As this coming week passes, let us each – personally if not publicly – once again walk with Jesus through these events of long ago. Choose any Gospel account you wish, or read a different account every evening, as each tell a slightly different story. **Matthew** focuses more on Jesus' final sermons to the people (20:17-28). **Luke** gives more details of His trial and death (19:28-24). **John** lovingly records Jesus' actions, words and prayers for His disciples during that fateful final meal (15-21). **Mark** focuses on what Jesus did and where He went; but all these stories end at the same cross (11-16). Thus having walked with Jesus throughout Holy week all the way to the cross and then the grave, when Easter morning arrives, we can knowingly and joyously join the throngs in shouting, *Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!*

As we once again remember the road Jesus traveled for us and we rejoice in that love for us which led Him to do it; then we should also be ready with renewed enthusiasm to respond to the command of our newly risen savior, ***to go into all our world baptizing and discipling all people, and teaching them everything he has taught us.*** For different reasons, some of us cannot do so at this time and others might be severely limited in where they can go. God knew there would be restrictions, so He afforded us many ways to share our faith, from kind words gently spoken, to food and water lovingly given. It would also be fantastic, if along the way you could get some more people to join with us in this church, but what is important is that you introduce people any way you can to Jesus Christ, their savior who died so that they might live.