

**1SUNDAY: Jesus Entry into Jerusalem 2-25-07**  
by Mary Jane Button-Harrison

It was Sunday, the beginning of the week of Passover - the most sacred week of the Jewish year. It was the day Christians have since celebrated as Palm Sunday, the first day of Holy Week which remembers the last week of Jesus' life ending in death on a Roman cross and resurrection on the following Sunday which we call Easter. This last week of Jesus' life, Holy Week, is the most sacred week of the Christian year.

Beginning today, and for the next 5 Sundays, we will be walking with Jesus through that last week. Each Sunday we will hear about and think about and maybe even experience a bit of what Jesus did in those last days.

It was Sunday, the beginning of the week of Passover. Two processions entered Jerusalem that day. We have heard of the one, the one from the east. We have heard how Jesus rode a donkey down

the mount of Olives as his followers spread out their cloaks and branches on the road, shouting hosanna and hailing the one who comes to proclaim the kingdom of God. But have you heard about the other procession? The one coming from the west, on the opposite side of the city. The one with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entering Jerusalem at the head of the imperial cavalry and soldiers, the one coming to proclaim the kingdom of the Roman emperor. These two processions embody the central conflict that led to Jesus' crucifixion.

It was Sunday, the beginning of the week of Passover, a time when 200,000 or more Jewish pilgrims came to Jerusalem for this most holy week. That's why the show of Roman power; to make sure there was peace and order during this time. A festival that celebrated the Jewish people's liberation from captivity from an earlier empire - the Egyptians - was something for the current empire to watch closely. And so they did. In the book, The Last Week by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, the book we will be studying in Sunday school and in a

Sunday evening book and bible study, we are invited to, "Imagine the imperial procession's arrival in the city. A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. **Sounds**: the marching of the feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust. The eyes of the silent onlookers, some curious, some awed, some resentful."

Pilate's procession from the west was a display of both imperial power and imperial theology. You see, it was believed that the ruler of Rome was the Son of God, lord, savior, one who had brought peace on earth - through imperial force of power and might. If you think those titles sound familiar, you are right. The titles we've come to use for Jesus were the very titles that were used to address the Roman emperor. To use them for someone other than the emperor would have been considered treasonous.

Jesus' procession from the east was also a show of power, but it could have not been more different. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey. He carried no armor, no weapons and had no soldiers to back him up. Rather, this king, this lord, this Son of God, this savior, was coming to bring peace on earth through the power of God's love.

It was Sunday, the beginning of the week of Passover with thousands upon thousands of people entering the city, and Jesus planned a counter procession to display a different sort of power that was in sharp contrast to the Roman imperial rule. It was the power of Kingdom of God... it was a *different* way of living, a *different* way of seeing the world, a *different* way of being in relationship. The contrast between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar is central to the gospel of Mark and is key to understanding the events that took place in Jerusalem during Jesus' last week.

Jerusalem was considered sacred by the Jewish people. It had been the center of religious life and imagination for about a thousand

years by the time Jesus arrived. It was the city of the great King David who brought justice and righteousness. Jerusalem was also associated with Israel's hope for the future - a time when peace and justice would be restored. Here, in Jerusalem, and most especially in the temple, was to be God's dwelling place. And so, the temple was a place to come, not only to experience God's presence, but also God's forgiveness. It was the place to offer sacrifice which was the means of forgiveness. And so, the temple was a center of devotion and a destination of pilgrimage, which is why so many people were arriving in Jerusalem on Sunday, the beginning of the week of Passover.

But, while Jerusalem was the city of hope, it was also problematic. By the time Jesus came on the scene, circumstances were such that the leaders of the temple were chosen now because of their wealth. Wealth in those times meant land ownership. Since land was the only way people could provide for themselves, buying someone else's land was not allowed. The only way to acquire more land -and thus more

wealth - was to confiscate it in order to pay off a debt. So, the wealthy would loan money to those at the bottom, and if they couldn't pay it back, they could take their land. Then the former owner would have nowhere to live and no way to provide for their family. This practice was increasing so that the wealthy were getting wealthier and the poor were being displaced and their living conditions worsening.

In part because of this phenomena, Jerusalem was not only a center of religious authority, but also a center of wealth. And, under the Roman empire, the leaders of the temple were among the wealthiest, authorized by the Roman governors. They were responsible for collecting the tribute to the empire as well as their own temple taxes. They were to maintain order and peace among to Jews. They were to keep Rome happy while also ruling their own people. While, on the one hand, they were in a difficult place, on the other hand, they shaped, enforced and benefited from a system that kept most of the people impoverished and oppressed.

That is the Jerusalem that Jesus entered on Palm Sunday. That's why his message was so critical of the temple and its role in dominating the common people, the ones for whom he processed that day, offering an alternative to the pomp and circumstance, the injustice and the violence or threat of violence that kept them in "their place." Jesus came to proclaim a different way, the kingdom of God.

We will be hearing from the gospel of Mark for the next 6 weeks as we go through Jesus last week ending with his resurrection. So it is important to note that in Mark, Jesus' message is not about himself. It is clear that Jesus is the son of God, but Jesus himself does not claim or teach about himself or his identity. Rather, Jesus' message over and over again, is that the kingdom of God has come near. And that is not just religious language. In Jesus' day, "kingdom" was a political term. And those who heard Jesus proclaim the kingdom of God would have understood that this was a kingdom very different from those they knew. Jesus came to show the way to this kingdom.

The way is that of love and compassion and justice and forgiveness.

The way is not mediated through the temple, but is accessible in loving relationships and in mercy and in giving up one's allegiance to the kingdom of the empire.

It was Sunday, the beginning of the week of Passover. Two processions entered Jerusalem that day; one from the west proclaiming the kingdom of Caesar and one from the east proclaiming the kingdom of God; one proclaiming peace through force and power and might, one proclaiming peace through love and grace and forgiveness; one bringing oppression and bondage, one bringing justice and release. In their closing sentences for chapter one, Borg and Crossan ask, "Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in? This is the question of Palm Sunday and of the week that is about to unfold." Dare we follow the one on the donkey who proclaimed, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." Amen.

March 4, 2007

Mark 11:12-19

**MONDAY: Overturning Tables/Exposing Power**

The way most Christians have been taught to think about Jesus overturning tables and cleansing the temple is probably not accurate. We've been told Jesus was having a fit of temper or that the money changers were greedy crooks deserving a disruption. Neither is correct.

Mary Jane and I are preaching from the Gospel of Mark between now and Easter on the events from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Sunday to his death outside Jerusalem on Friday. We are relying heavily on the book, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Each Sunday we take a different day. Today's story is Monday.

This final week is important. It is the heart of the gospel. How we see what Jesus did and why makes all the difference in how we follow him.

- Following him means we behave the way we think he would behave.
- It means we make decisions the way we think he would decide them.
- It means we cultivate the kind of attitudes we believe he cultivated.
- It means we approach God after the way we see him approaching God.

If we interpret the Bible correctly then the kind of Christians we become will turn out right. We will be people who put on compassion and stand against injustice and make love the hallmark of our lives.

One reason so many people have left churches is not that they have a problem with Jesus but that they can no longer believe many of the things they have been taught. They are still Christians. They can't find a place for

themselves in a church. That's painful all around.

Mary Jane and I intend to give you a fuller, non-traditional interpretation of the texts so we all can follow Jesus in a church that has room for a variety of insights and experiences and makes a welcome place for everybody. We intend this to be a church where you will want to invite others because there is something important happening here. It changes how we are with God.

It is very important. It is important enough that we are teaching the texts in Sunday School and offering an evening Book and Bible study each Sunday at 5:00 where we have a chance to probe more deeply. We want you to be a part of the studies. We have a few copies of the book for sale at a discounted price. See one of us if you want to buy one. Will you make this journey with us?

The weather has not been our friend here. Mary Jane's Palm Sunday sermon is worth hearing. The snow shut most of us out last Sunday. We offered a make-up service last Tuesday evening. Still, most of us have not heard what she said to launch the series. It is important because we need to understand that Jesus' entry was not a triumphal children's parade with palms. It was an anti-imperial lampooning of Roman authority.

- You can check out the tape from the church library.
- You can download the text from the church's web page.

Mark loves to start one story, interrupt it with another story, and then, at the end, put the two stories together, letting them interpret each other. Scholars call Mark's technique "framing." He creates frames all through the

gospel. Today's text is one instance of it.

We start with Jesus going back into Jerusalem from Bethany (we'll have more to say about Bethany in weeks ahead) on Monday morning. On the way, he sees a fig tree. He's hungry. But it's *early* spring. It's not the time of the year for figs. Despite that he curses the fig tree. The disciples heard him.

Mark leaves that story to jump to the next where Jesus enters Jerusalem, enters the temple and creates a scene,

- **driving** out people who are buying and selling,
- **turning** over the tables of the money changers and the seats of the dove sellers,
- and **forbidding** anyone to carry anything through the temple.

The chief priests and scribes start plotting a way to kill him.

But the people **love** him.

In the evening he leaves Jerusalem. We won't finish the frame until Tuesday morning when, as they go back into town, they see the fig tree all withered and dead.

What Jesus did on Monday was not a simple cleansing of the temple. It was prophetic and public act in the tradition of Jeremiah who some 600 years before who called attention to injustice. Jeremiah stood in front of the temple and confronted those who would enter about their false sense of security:

- that they took it for granted that God would guarantee the security of Jerusalem,
- that God would excuse them from doing justice,
- that all God wants is attendance in the temple and not reform in the law.

Jeremiah declared that for God, doing right is more important than attending worship. Jeremiah concludes... "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?" (Jeremiah 7:11).

The den is a refuge, a sanctuary, a safe house. It's not where the robbery occurs but the place robbers flee for safety afterwards. The temple isn't the scene of the crime. It's where the crooks go for asylum.

A thief may break into your house and steal your things while you are not at home, or sleeping in your bed, and you won't know about it until later. But a robber confronts you face-to-face. A robber holds a knife to your throat or a gun to your head and demands what you have.

The word "robber" can just as easily be translated, "brigand." The Romans would have translated it "insurrectionist" or "terrorist." The Jewish people might have translated it "freedom-fighter." See the power of language?

The money changers and animal sellers were not the robbers. They were perfectly legitimate and absolutely necessary for the temple's normal functioning. Roman money was no good in the temple. Roman money had the picture of Caesar on it and an inscription declaring that Caesar was the son of God. Jews weren't even supposed to have Roman money. Certainly they could not take such blasphemous coins into the house of God.

So the money changers, for a fee, would exchange your secular, Caesar-rendered coins into temple coins for your offering, which had no graven images or profane inscriptions. There is no evidence that the money changers were crooks. They were outside the temple, in the huge Court of the Gentiles with their tables set up like kiosks or booths at a show.

Jesus symbolically shut down of the temple in fulfillment of God's threat uttered by Jeremiah. It was public drama to direct attention to something important. There is nothing wrong with prayer and sacrifice in the temple. They are commanded. That is not the problem. The problem is that people are substituting religious ritual from the religious command to do right by each other, especially for the poor, the alien, and the voiceless. God is a God of justice and righteousness and when worship substitutes for justice, God rejects the temple - and the church.

This is where the story re-connects with the fig tree. He shuts it down the temple, a symbolic destruction. He shuts down the fig tree for lack of fruit. The tree's fate emphasizes that meaning.

We need to know one more thing. The way it was supposed to work was for the high priest to be appointed, from one of the royal priestly families, for life. But the Romans took that authority and hired and fired priests at will, according to how well they toed the Roman line. Over time the priests had become collaborators with Rome against their own people. Jesus stands against this religious abuse in the name of God. He did not attack Judaism as a religion, or the priesthood as an institution. He did assert the *already present* kingdom of God against both the *already present* Roman imperial power and the *already present* Jewish high-priestly collaboration.

Jerusalem had to be retaken by a nonviolent messiah rather than by a violent revolution, and the temple ritual had to empower justice rather than excuse one from it.

What is involved for Jesus is an absolute criticism not only of violent domination, but of any religious collaboration with it. In that criticism, of course, he stands *with* Jeremiah against injustice, but he also stands *against* all forms of Christianity that have been used through the centuries to support imperial violence and injustice.

No wonder the authorities plotted to kill him. No wonder the people loved him! It would be easier for us who have the power of Rome to stay with the traditional interpretation and say he was having a temper tantrum or upset with the money changers. But we'd be wrong. Now we know. If we follow Jesus we'll have to care about people who are poor, people who are aliens in the land, and people who have no advocates to speak up on their behalf. It may get us in trouble. Look what it did for Jesus.

"Take up your cross," he said, "and follow me!"

March 11, 2007

Mark 12:13-17

**Tuesday: A Matter of Taxation and Representation**

Welcome to Holy Week. We're tracing Jesus' last week on earth in Jerusalem. We started two weeks ago with his donkey ride into Jerusalem, along with all those thousands of other pilgrims thronging in for Passover on Sunday. His parade with palms was a counter-demonstration to Pilate's huge military parade on the other side of the city. This will become a very interesting week. Jesus knows he won't be coming out on the other side.

Last Sunday we watched him storm into the temple scattering coins and overturning tables and denouncing authorities, shutting down the temple, yelling: "This place is supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations. But you have turned it into a den of robbers." That was Monday.

This is Tuesday. Jesus is back at the temple for a day full of controversy and conflict, attack and counterattack, trap and counter-trap. All kinds of opponents line up against him: chief priests, scribes, elders Pharisees, Herodians, and a lawyer who challenge him, only to be foiled. They all have hot-button questions designed to get him in trouble no matter how he answers. Jesus outwits them all, turns their questions back on them so *they* look foolish, and wins the hearts of the people with every exchange. "After that," says Mark dryly, "no one dared to ask him any more questions."

I've picked the question posed by the Pharisees and Herodians. Pharisees were all about keeping things traditional, pure, and uncontaminated by the evil world. But Herodians, knowing on which side the bread is buttered, were in cahoots with Rome, for the sake of the money.

They start with a fawning prologue:

"Teacher, we know you are sincere..."

"We know you have integrity and don't pander to public opinion."

"We know you teach God's way accurately..."

Then comes the sly trap question:

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar... or not?"

Here's why it was a volatile question. About 60 years before Jesus was born Rome launched an invasion, conquered the Jews and set up government. Like ruling powers always do Rome exacted major taxes from the Jews. The Roman version of the IRS did not collect money from individuals. They collected from territories. To get the cash they set up district managers who had a quota to fill. Rome didn't care how the tax collectors got the loot. They cared very much that they got it. The Jews, naturally, hated this system, subject to bribery and all kinds of corruption that it was.

If Jesus had said, "no" you should not pay your taxes, his adversaries would have yelled and screamed:

"Sedition! Law-breaker.

Insurrection. Rebellion. Revolt. Uprising. Terrorist!"

And they would have turned him in to the Romans who would lock him up and he'd be out of their way, out of their temple, out where he couldn't cause more trouble.

But if Jesus had said, "yes" you should pay your taxes, they'd have yelled

and screamed:

"Roman sympathizer. Traitor. Card-carrying Roman lackey."

And the crowds would have turned away from him and he'd be out of favor so they could do what they really wanted to do: kill him. Then he couldn't cause more trouble with either the Jews or the Romans.

His response is masterful. He turns the tables, to "coin a phrase" on them. "Bring me a denarius," he says. That's a silver coin worth about a day's pay.

They brought him one.

Jesus looks at it and asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title."

"The emperor's."

Now here's the deal, everybody there at the temple that day understood perfectly well something we don't generally understand... which leads to all kinds of wrong-headed interpretations and silly notions. These religious leaders are not even supposed to have a Roman coin in the temple. Roman coins have a picture of Caesar on them. They also have an inscription that says, "Son of God." Caesar claimed to be the Son of God. Jews have a commandment about graven images and idolatry. You can't have that stuff in the temple.

You can't take profane money from the evil empire Roman state into the House of God! When Jesus says, "Show me the money," without thinking,

they produce a coin - and that's when he got them. They were carrying Roman coins. They are partners in the Roman collaboration. It is brilliant. Their trap has been evaded and Jesus' own counter-trip is locked and loaded; set and sprung. The Pharisees and Herodians, not Jesus, are discredited!

Mary Jane and I have suggested that what we call the triumphant entry on Palm Sunday was not triumphant at all but a political statement about power. And we have suggested that what we call the cleansing of the temple on Monday was not a cleansing of the temple at all but a prophetic demonstration of speaking truth to power.

Now I want to suggest that this deal with the coins is not, as traditional Christian interpretation would have it, a division into two realms,

church and state

sacred and secular

religion and politics

separated forever between heaven and earth...

All that is wrong.

Jesus gives his answer to his opponents in two parallel halves:

1. Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's. You have Caesar's coin, give it back to him. No problem.
2. Give to God the things that are God's. Well, think about it. What is God's. "What belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God?" Everything belongs to God.

Scripture is full of teachings that declare that we are but tenant farmers, we are but resident aliens on land that belongs to God. (Leviticus 25:23)

The vineyard belongs to God. It does not belong to the local collaborators and it does not belong to Rome, or the United States, or any human empire or government.

The whole earth belongs to God (Ps. 24.1),

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

So, what belongs to Caesar?

Nothing.

Think about that when you decide what you will keep and what you will return to God of the abundance that you have been given in your time, in your attention to worship, in your energy, and in your money. Give Caesar what is Caesar's. Give to God...

As Jesus and his followers leave the temple he predicts its destruction, setting in motion a series of events from which he knows he will not emerge alive.

We will pick up the story of Wednesday in Jerusalem next Sunday. But you can get a preview by coming to the Book and Bible Study here at the church at 5:00 this evening.

## WEDNESDAY: Belief and Betrayal 3-18-07

It was two days before the Passover - Wednesday. On *Sunday* Jesus processed into the city of Jerusalem on a humble donkey at one end of the city while the Roman imperial army and rulers processed on horses with weapons and armor in a demonstration of physical strength and power at the other end. On *Monday* Jesus turned over the tables at the temple court and stopped commerce in protest of how the temple had become a haven for religious authorities collaborating with Rome in a system of injustice. On *Tuesday* Jesus and the religious leaders - the scribes and the Pharisees; the Herodians and the Sadducees; the chief priests and the elders - questioned Jesus, trying to trap him and make him look bad. But in the end, Jesus had turned the tables on them and they were the ones who looking bad.

For three days now, Jesus has behaved in ways that have both provoked the authorities and awed the crowd. The throng of pilgrims

who have come from far and wide to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and offer sacrifice in the temple have been impressed by Jesus ability and willingness to stand up to the Jewish leaders in cahoots with Rome, who benefit while most of them barely get by. Of course, this makes Jesus is quite popular with the people. And, of course, it makes him unpopular with the authorities. They see him as a threat. Precisely because Jesus is so popular, they understand the need to get rid of him before he draws anymore of a crowd. They don't want the Roman authorities to think they can't handle "their own."      And so we come to Wednesday. The leaders of the temple have a problem. They need to find a way to arrest Jesus, as the gospel writer puts it, "by stealth and kill him." They can't do it in the open or they may cause a riot among the people. So, they need to find an informant; a spy, a betrayer from among Jesus closest followers so that they can seize Jesus at a time when he is not among the crowds. That is the problem presented to us at the beginning of our gospel

reading today. And, by the end of the reading, the problem has been solved. For by the end of this passage, one of the twelve - Judas Iscariot - goes to the chief priests in order to betray Jesus. And they are greatly pleased. Carefully placed in between the statement of the problem and the resolution is the story of the woman who anoints Jesus with very costly oil. In order to understand this story, we need to understand some of the broader themes in the gospel of Mark.

Two things that are very clear in Mark's telling of the story are that Jesus knew he was going to suffer and die and that the disciples just didn't "get it." As Crossan and Borg put it in their book, The Last Week, "To be the Twelve in Mark's story is to fail Jesus badly." They just don't seem to get what Jesus is all about and what he is trying to convey to them. As an example of this, Jesus predicts his suffering and death three times before it actually happens. And each time he makes this prediction, the disciples prove they don't believe him or they don't understand the nature of what he's saying. The first time

Jesus predicts his suffering and death, Peter rebukes him and Jesus follows by telling the twelve and the crowds that "anyone who wants to follow me must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The second time Jesus predicts his suffering and death, Mark tells us "they did not understand what he was saying..." and the very next thing, the disciples get into an argument about who was the greatest. Jesus responds to this display of immaturity by telling them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

In Jesus' final prediction of his suffering and death, James and John respond by asking Jesus if they can sit at Jesus' right and left hand in his glory. This, of course, sparks anger among the other disciples and Jesus ends this dialogue by telling them, "You know that among the *Gentiles* those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you must be

your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all."

Jesus processed into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. His coming into the city on a lowly donkey without horses and armor and weapons suggests that the kingdom of God operates out of a different understanding of power. It is the power of love, compassion, justice and grace. Mark's telling of the story of Jesus' life among the disciples makes it clear that they had a very difficult time grasping this new way of being - the way of the kingdom of God. It was so utterly different than the kingdom of Rome and the way they experienced life under Roman rule and religious collaboration with that domination system that those disciples, those closest to Jesus, just didn't understand.

It's not about gaining power and privilege in order to be treated as one who is great. It's about serving and loving and following a way of justice and peace. It's not about being given the place of honor, but

about all being valued. It's not about gain at other's expense, but about gain by losing oneself. In the Kingdom of God, the first shall be last, children become role models, and the greatest of all is servant of all. And when you become a citizen of this kingdom, you will not only participate in the glory of Jesus, but in his suffering and death as well.

In Mark's gospel, Judas is not the only one who betrays Jesus, all of the twelve fail. Either they betray Jesus or deny Jesus or simply run away all together. And that's what brings this story of the woman with the alabaster jar to life. In response to this woman anointing Jesus with very expensive ointment, the disciples scold her. But Jesus comes to her defense and says, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her." But just what was so remarkable about what this woman did? Why would Jesus praise her so?

Taken in context, the twelve don't really believe that Jesus will

suffer and die. Maybe they're still thinking that Jesus is the kind of messiah who will reign on the throne like their ancestor, David. Maybe they think Jesus is exaggerating the situation. Whatever the reason, they simply don't believe Jesus. In stark contrast, this unnamed woman comes to anoint Jesus for burial. She didn't just come to show off by bringing expensive ointment. She actually believes what Jesus says, that he will suffer and die and rise again. She believes him and acts accordingly. She anoints his body for burial. So, in essence, this unnamed woman is the first believer. Unlike the disciples (who, by the way, rebuke her) she gets it. She believes Jesus even before the resurrection has occurred. She will be remembered because unlike the twelve, she didn't fail Jesus. She believed him and ministered to him in his time of need.

At the beginning of our scripture today, the chief priests are looking for a betrayer from among Jesus' closest followers. Then the unnamed woman anoints Jesus, and finally Judas comes forward to

volunteer for the role of betrayer. The disciples are confused. The chief priests are happy. And the plot thickens as we move through Jesus last week. Now, not only are the temple leaders out to get Jesus, but the disciples fail him as well. Mark's gospel paints a picture of the disciples as all too human. They keep getting it wrong. Jesus keeps trying to help them get it. And they fail again.

In that good old hymn, "Are Ye Able," we sing, "Are ye able," said the Master, "to be crucified with me?" "Yea, the sturdy dreamers answered, "to the death we follow thee," We want to be ones who can honestly respond, "Lord, we are able." Our spirits are thine." And that is certainly what Peter said before he failed Jesus by denying he ever knew him. Mark's gospel is a very human, real gospel. And we, like the twelve, fail to follow the way of Jesus at times, fail to go the way of the cross. But, as Mark also shows us, God is a God of love and forgiveness and grace and second and third chances. May we believe! Amen.

March 25, 2007

Thursday

Mark 14:12-16

<sup>12</sup>On the first day of Unleavened Bread,  
when the Passover lamb is sacrificed,  
his disciples said to him,  
"Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you  
to eat the Passover?"

<sup>13</sup>So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them,  
"Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you;  
follow him,  
<sup>14</sup>and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house,  
'The Teacher asks,  
Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my  
disciples?'

<sup>15</sup>He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready.  
Make preparations for us there."

<sup>16</sup>So the disciples set out and went to the city,  
and found everything as he had told them;  
and they prepared the Passover meal.

*Elders Deb and Eric set the communion table with a wine carafe and bread  
and grapes and plates, cups.*

## Talking with children

### Thursday 1: Preparation for Passover

It's Thursday of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem.

Events are rushing toward climax as forces of opposition find their way to work their will to destroy him. Jesus boldly takes charge of the week.

It's the day of preparation for Passover.

It's the day when we hear those words etched in our deepest hearts:

"Take. This is my body."

"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."

Thursday. This is the day of body and blood.

- This is the day of the night - violence worked in the dark.
- This day Jesus will pray and receive "no" for an answer.
- This day people will come into a garden with swords and clubs for arrest.
- This night he will suffer interrogation and condemnation.
- This night disciples will betray him and deny him and leave him alone in the grasp all those who have waited all week to take him and kill him.

Thursday: this is the day of sacrifice when the Passover Lamb is killed and eaten.

Come back to the start of the day, this **first** day of Unleavened Bread. He had a plan and a purpose.

He sent two disciples - two disciples whose names we do not know.

Later he'll pick the big three - Peter, James, and John - to go with him to the garden to pray and they will sleep.

But now he picks two whose names we don't know, who will not fail him.

Maybe they were two of the women who followed him. We don't know.

They went with instructions but not with insight.

"Go find a man carrying water."

It's a page out of a spy novel.

Meet your contact.

You'll know him because he's doing women's work.

Not that many men carried water.

Jesus planned his entrance into Jerusalem on **Sunday**. It was public drama. But his eating of the Passover meal on Thursday, also planned, is in private.

The disciples do not know even the place.

Even those on the inner circle cannot know.

For *one* of them will betray him to the authorities who want to kill him.

For *all* of them will deny him or desert him to those who want to destroy him.

They must not seize the moment before he is ready.

This meal must be eaten without interruption.

This meal must be given space and time. A room furnished and readied must be found. In a city full of pilgrims come there to eat this meal, finding a room like that takes planning and preparation.

So two of them go back from Bethany into the city where they search for a man carrying water and follow him to a house and inquire of the owner of the house about the room set aside for Jesus where they can eat the traditional meal of Jews remembering the night when God's angel of death passed over the homes of escaping slaves, homes marked by the blood of a lamb smeared on the door, homes where people dreaming deliverance waited in fear.

Dare we follow him into that meal?

Dare we remember in our own stories when the angel of death passed over?  
Or didn't.

Dare we consider the forces of evil surrounding us, tempting us, betraying us?

Dare we join in the circle of fellowship of those who receive the bread from his outstretched hand with the solemn words:

"Take. Eat. This is my body."? Or receive the cup of new covenant, drawing us into the new Passover, creating in us large spaces for deliverance?

Can we resist the interruptions so that we can enter that upper room prepared?

What we believe about Jesus is important. When he is the leader of our lives, when we give ourselves into his keeping, as we follow, however unwittingly and failingly but faithfully, he draws us into an upside way of living where servants lead and children point the way and honor is given to those who understand that life is found in the losing and God is loved in the

serving. Dare we enter that new covenant?

It will cost us.

It will cost us our lives.

It will demand that we carry crosses and pass through death into resurrection with Jesus who we trust as guide and protector.

It's a real meal. Dare we eat it with him?

**Call to Communion**

**Mary Jane**

Hymn

*Eat This Bread*

414

*Mary Jane, Eric and Deb sit at the Table on the chancel.*

*Deacons come forward from the back with trays and serve the people.*

**Sharing our offering**

**Scripture**

**Mark 14:26-52**

<sup>26</sup>When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

<sup>27</sup>And Jesus said to them,

"You will all become deserters; for it is written,

'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'

<sup>28</sup>But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

<sup>29</sup>Peter said to him,

"Even though all become deserters, I will not."

<sup>30</sup>Jesus said to him,

"Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

<sup>31</sup>But he said vehemently,

"Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."

And all of them said the same.

<sup>32</sup>They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples,  
"Sit here while I pray."

<sup>33</sup>He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. <sup>34</sup>And he said to them,

"I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake."

<sup>35</sup>And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. <sup>36</sup>He said,

"Abba, Father, for you all things are possible;  
remove this cup from me; yet,  
not what I want, but what you want."

<sup>37</sup>He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter,

"Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?"

<sup>38</sup>Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial;  
the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

<sup>39</sup>And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. <sup>40</sup>And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. <sup>41</sup>He came a third time and said to them,

"Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough!

The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

<sup>42</sup>Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

<sup>43</sup>Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. <sup>44</sup>Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying,

"The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard."

<sup>45</sup>So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. <sup>46</sup>Then they laid hands on him and arrested him.

<sup>47</sup>But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. <sup>48</sup>Then Jesus said to them,

"Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? <sup>49</sup>Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled."

<sup>50</sup>All of them deserted him and fled.

<sup>51</sup>A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, <sup>52</sup>but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

## Thursday 2: Belief and Betrayal

The story *begins* with the preparation for and eating of Jesus' final meal with the followers.

It *ends* with the denial by Peter and Jesus' abandonment to the authorities and Peter weeping bitterly into the night.

- Between the preparation and culmination is a the garden scene where we see Jesus praying to be spared - a plea rejected.
- We see Judas approach with his betraying kiss.
- We see the crowd bearing swords and clubs intent on arrest.
- We see the interrogation and condemnation to death by the high priest and the council. Friday will begin at sunup. Thursday is a day of the night.

Just now we watch as he prays prior to his arrest.

He throws himself to the ground in distress and grief.

He prays,

"Papa, you can... *can* you? Can't you - get me out of this. Let this hour pass from me. Take this cup away from me.

But, please, not what I want - what do *you* want?"

Who would pray any differently? He was facing incredible torture and a hideously cruel death. Who of us has not prayed this prayer in time of peril or plight? Let this hour pass. Death draws near. I don't want to go through

with it. Can't you change it, God? Won't you?  
The answer for Jesus is, "No."

Does that mean it was God's will for Jesus to die? Of course not. God never wills for the righteous to suffer. God never kills people. But yet, even so, some people, to be true to themselves and to the God they serve, face death rather than betrayal. They trust God who guards the soul more than they fear people who can destroy only the body. Jesus leads the way for us all, praying with everything in him for deliverance, and, at the end, submitting to God's will and way. Perhaps he could have, like the disciples, run off into the night in fear. But we would not remember him, nor call him savior nor eat at his table if he had.

Given the situation at hand Jesus must face a violent and terrible death for the Passover into God-life to be set in motion.

And so they came, marching into the garden of prayer, with orders and a warrant for his arrest. The soldiers would not recognize Jesus. Judas leads the way with his kiss of betrayal. And a disciple pulls out a sword - see, they still don't understand. Jesus' way is not the way of swords. And we who would follow him must not turn to that way as well.

They will take him before the chief priests and elders and scribes for interrogation. Outside, Peter will deny him three times before the rooster crows twice. And Jesus will be sentenced as a pretender prophet, a blasphemer against God, and a threat to the people. Before the break of dawn on Friday, Jesus, covered with spittle and bruises, will be handed over to the Romans, condemned to death.

We will return next Sunday for the rest of the story.

Musical call to worship

Gary Kane

Setting the scene

David Digby

*David comes out wearing an ankle-length black robe with deep hood and circles the twelve-and-a-half-foot wooden cross anchored in the center of the chancel; exclaiming:*

**DEATH....**

Death. This is the day of **DEATH**.

This is **my** day....

**MY** day of *crows* and *clawing things* and the evil that stinks in this city like a garbage heap.

All week I have stalked that Jesus of Nazareth      come to town to mock **ME**.  
Today *i* will have him!

*i* watched him ride into town on Sunday -  
    saying he was come to Jerusalem to **DIE**.  
*i* approve of dying!

I heard him say on **MONDAY** if they tore down the temple he'd build it back in *three* days.

Liar! He will not cheat **ME**.

When *i* take my own, they never come back.

I am **DEATH**.

I heard him outsmart lawyers and priests on **TUESDAY** and I despaired.  
Fools! They'd never catch him out. But all he did was inspire them to destroy him.

And on **WEDNESDAY** when that woman crashed his little dinner party with her

jar of perfume all she did was to anoint his body for **BURIAL**.  
I approve of burial.

YESTERDAY his betrayer kissed him with my kiss of death.  
And **God** refused his desperate prayer for deliverance.  
And soldiers carried him away with swords and clubs.  
And leaders condemned him to die.  
Yesterday was THURSDAY.

Today is FRIDAY.  
FRIDAY we tear apart body from soul.  
FRIDAY we pronounce sentence:  
    execution by hanging until dead, on a cross.  
FRIDAY we get our blood-soaked wish.  
FRIDAY the whip whistles and cracks.  
FRIDAY the nails are set and he cries his last.

Even **God** has nothing to do with him today.  
TODAY he dies.  
Today he is mine.  
I am **DEATH!**

**6:00 A.M. - 9:00 A.M.**

*David reads the AGaramond face lines and Mary Jane reads the Dauphin face lines.*

**Scripture**

**Mark 15:1-20**

<sup>1</sup>As soon as it was morning,  
    *the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council.*  
They bound Jesus,  
    *led him away,*  
and handed him over to Pilate.  
    <sup>2</sup>*Pilate asked him,*

“Are you the King of the Jews?”

*He answered him,*

“You say so.”

*<sup>3</sup>Then the chief priests accused him of many things.*

<sup>4</sup>Pilate asked him again,

*“Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.”*

<sup>5</sup>But Jesus made no further reply,

*so that Pilate was amazed.*

<sup>6</sup>Now at the festival he used to release a prisoner for them,  
*anyone for whom they asked.*

<sup>7</sup>Now a man called Barabbas was in prison with the rebels who had committed murder during the insurrection.

*<sup>8</sup>So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom.*

<sup>9</sup>Then he answered them,

*“Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”*

<sup>10</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed him over.

*<sup>11</sup>But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead.*

<sup>12</sup>Pilate spoke to them again,

*“Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”*

<sup>13</sup>They shouted back,

*“Crucify him!”*

<sup>14</sup>Pilate asked them,

*“Why, what evil has he done?”*

But they shouted all the more,

*“Crucify him!”*

<sup>15</sup>So Pilate,

*wishing to satisfy the crowd,*

released Barabbas for them;

*and after flogging Jesus,*

he handed him over to be crucified.

<sup>16</sup>Then the soldiers led him into the courtyard of the palace  
(that is, the governor’s headquarters);

*and they called together the whole cohort.*

<sup>17</sup>And they clothed him in a purple cloak;  
*and after twisting some thorns into a crown,*  
they put it on him.

<sup>18</sup>And they began saluting him,  
“Hail, King of the Jews!”

<sup>19</sup>They struck his head with a reed,  
spat upon him,  
*and knelt down in homage to him.*

<sup>20</sup>After mocking him,  
*they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him.*  
Then they led him out to crucify him.

✝ **Hymn** *O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go* (1 and 4)

540

**Talking with children**

Mary Jane Button-Harrison

### 9:00 A.M. - NOON

#### Scripture

Mark 15:21-32

<sup>21</sup>They compelled a passer-by,  
*who was coming in from the country,*  
to carry his cross;  
*it was Simon of Cyrene,*  
the father of Alexander and Rufus.

<sup>22</sup>Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha  
(which means the place of a skull).

<sup>23</sup>And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh;  
but he did not take it.

<sup>24</sup>And they crucified him,  
and divided his clothes among them,  
*casting lots to decide what each should take.*

<sup>25</sup>It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him.

<sup>26</sup>The inscription of the charge against him read,  
“The King of the Jews.”

<sup>27</sup>And with him they crucified two bandits,  
one on his right and one on his left.

<sup>29</sup>Those who passed by derided him,  
shaking their heads and saying,

“Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days,

<sup>30</sup>save yourself, and come down from the cross!”

<sup>31</sup>In the same way the chief priests,  
along with the scribes,

were also mocking him among themselves and saying,

“He saved others;

he cannot save himself.

<sup>32</sup>Let the Messiah,

the King of Israel,

come down from the cross now,

so that we may see and believe.”

Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.

## Hymn

## *O Sacred Head Now Wounded*

202

## Prayer

*David and Mary Jane share: after each prays the congregation sings:*

Great and Gracious God:

We have dared to call this Day of Death “Good Friday!” Only in great faith can we gaze upon such horror as we witness here and find anything beyond the evil of the hour. We tremble, sometimes, when our faith drags us here; when we’d rather run away into the night, when we’d rather turn this blood and spikes into a pastoral scene so as to blunt the agony of it. But here we are, on Friday, at Golgotha and the smell of death hangs heavy in the atmosphere, pressing the air out of us, choking the breath out of us. Come and listen to us. We need you this day.

### *Sung response*

O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.

When I call, answer me.

O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
Come and listen to me.

*Mary Jane prays*

*Response*

O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
When I call, answer me.  
O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
Come and listen to me.

*David prays*

Two empires, clashing: swords and shields against a covenant with bread and wine at a dinner table. For the glimpses of glory we see in your kingdom life, O God, we say thank you.

We thank you for our newborn baby: Adam Jacob Pendry, all healthy and whole and full of promise. May he never suffer harm. May he grow strong and great in faith. May we be a good church for him and for his parents Mendy and John.

We thank you for the hours of prayer where we can come and lay out our hearts before you, throwing ourselves down in worship of you, hearing the voice that comes to us from you. Hear our prayers and bless us with wisdom and courage as we pray them.

We thank you for love, love that outlasts fear and is greater than despair. We see it in Jesus who endured the shame of the cross so we might get it. Take up our lives that we might be fearless servants, trustworthy in your work and wise in your way. In Jesus our savior we pray.

*Response*

O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
When I call, answer me.  
O Lord, hear my prayer; O Lord, hear my prayer.  
Come and listen to me.

**NOON**

**Scripture**

Mark 15:33

<sup>33</sup>When it was noon,  
darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

**Hymn**

*Were You There*

198

**3:00 P.M. - 6:00 P.M.**

**Scripture**

Mark 15:34-42

<sup>34</sup>At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice,  
"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"  
which means,  
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"  
<sup>35</sup>When some of the bystanders heard it, they said,  
"Listen, he is calling for Elijah."  
<sup>36</sup>And someone ran,  
filled a sponge with sour wine,  
put it on a stick,  
and gave it to him to drink, saying,  
"Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down."  
<sup>37</sup>Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.  
<sup>38</sup>And the curtain of the temple was torn in two,  
from top to bottom.  
<sup>39</sup>Now when the centurion,  
who stood facing him,  
saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,  
"Truly this man was God's Son!"

*Extinguish the Christ Candle on the Lord's Table*

<sup>40</sup>There were also women looking on from a distance;  
among them were Mary Magdalene,  
and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses,  
and Salome.

<sup>41</sup>These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee;



And pour contempt on all my pride."

## Communion

Bidding to communion

David Digby

On Friday the familiar phrase, "take, eat, this is my body, broken for you" comes alive in us with teeth. We feel the bite. As we look on the cross, towering like a wreck over the church, from which blood spills down, Jesus inviting us to a new covenant in blood, his blood, attracts and appals us. We are invited. When you are ready, come down the center aisle to receive the bread, dip it in the cup as it is offered to you. As you wait your place at the table, pay heed to your prayers. Others are here who are praying also. It's God's kingdom. It's Jesus' meal. It's the covenant of grace. It is new life. Come. All is ready.

Communion hymn

*Eat This Bread*

414 (Sing twice)

Words of institution

Elder's praying God's blessing

Each person is welcome at Christ's table where the dividing wall of human hostilities is broken down in God's uniting love. Come down the center aisle, as you are ready; receive the bread, dip it in the cup, and return to your pew via one of the side aisles.

**Setting the scene**    *Here Hangs a Man Discarded*

Mary Jane

*Here hangs a man discarded, a scarecrow hoisted high,  
a nonsense pointing nowhere to all who hurry by.*

*Can such a clown of sorrows still bring a useful word  
where faith and love seem phantoms and every hope absurd?*

*Yet here is help and comfort to lives by comfort bound  
when drums of dazzling progress give strangely hollow sound.*

*Life emptied of all meaning, drained out in bleak distress,  
can share in broken silence our deepest emptiness;*

*And love that freely entered the pit of life's despair  
can name our hidden darkness and suffer with us there.*

*Lord, if you now are risen help all who long for light  
to hold the hand of promise till faith receives its sight.*

Hymn

*The Old Rugged Cross (1 and 2)*

548

**6:00 P.M.****Scripture**

Mark 15:42-47

<sup>42</sup>When evening had come,  
and since it was the day of Preparation,  
that is, the day before the sabbath,  
<sup>43</sup>Joseph of Arimathea,  
a respected member of the council,  
who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God,  
went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.  
<sup>44</sup>Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead;  
and summoning the centurion,  
he asked him whether he had been dead for some time.  
<sup>45</sup>When he learned from the centurion that he was dead,  
he granted the body to Joseph.  
<sup>46</sup>Then Joseph bought a linen cloth,  
and taking down the body,  
wrapped it in the linen cloth,  
and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock.  
He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.  
<sup>47</sup>Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the  
body was laid.

✝ Hymn

*Beneath the Cross of Jesus*

197

✝ Sending

MJ: We come, following Jesus who leads us to a cross.

All: We go, taking up our cross to follow!

April 8, 2007

Seized by Terror and Amazement

Mark 16:1-8

Jesus is dead.

Remember how, on Sunday, he rode into town? There were two parades that day. One parade was the display of military might,  
soldiers mounted on war stallions,  
spears raised against the sky,  
helmets shining in the sun.

But Jesus' parade was a noisy group of joyous pilgrims waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna" as he rode into the city, on a donkey.

Were you amazed when he coursed into the temple on Monday,  
scattering coins and people and tables and  
declaring that the leaders, in cahoots with the Empire,  
had turned this house of God into a den of robbers?

Of course they began plotting how to get rid of him.

But the people loved him.

Then on Tuesday, remember, back at the temple,  
how he bested, one after another,  
the best and cleverest scholars and legal minds  
they could throw at him with trap questions and trick proposals.

He not only evaded their traps but turned them back on them.

And the people loved him. But the authorities despised him.

Then, remember Wednesday?

There was that dinner party at Simon the Leper's  
and the woman came in, uninvited.

She was the only one who understood what Jesus had been talking  
about, that he was going to die.

Nobody else believed he'd actually die.

And she poured out her perfume on him and wept for him  
and when they scolded her for such impertinence  
he praised her for courage and truth  
and predicted that forever people would talk about what she did.

Oh, and who could forget Thursday?

How he sent a couple of his followers set up the room where they could  
eat the Passover meal.

He'd made arrangements in secret because he knew that he had an  
informer in the inner circle,

a spy for the bad guys was ready to do him in.

But when they gathered for that *Memory Meal* when God delivered slaves  
from bondage and set them out on the path to freedom he took all that  
and then took bread and broke it and told them it was his body.

And he took wine and poured it and gave it to them  
and told them it was his blood.

They didn't understand.

Then he led them out to the garden where he prayed and they slept.

Then came his betrayer with a kiss of death  
and the soldiers with clubs and swords  
and led him off to a midnight court session

where they pronounced him guilty  
and all his followers ran off into the night leaving him utterly alone.

Friday. Good Friday we call it: when they whipped him and stripped him and hung him high on a cross and laughed at him as they watched him die.

He did die that day, alone,  
except for some of the loyal women who'd followed him  
all the way from Galilee and stayed with him to the bitter end.

Remember? They put the corpse in a tomb and sealed it with a boulder.

End of story. Jesus is dead.

Saturday came. Sabbath. Nothing to do but tremble and despair and know in your bones that all hell has broke loose and there'll be no stopping it now.

Then Sunday. Mary and Mary and Salome go to the tomb with spices and oils to finish the job that woman whose name we do not know began on Wednesday - anointing, respecting, caring for.

Bodies are important, even when dead,  
because persons are important and are not to be thrown away,  
discarded like trash,  
dumped unceremoniously aside without memory or love.

Sunup. First light.

The only other person in the story, as Mark tells it, is a young man dressed in white. Mary Magdalene and Mary (other of James) and Salome are alarmed.

They are terrified.

This young man dressed in white is in the grave and Jesus is not.

This young man tells them to chill but they don't.

He asks them to look where Jesus was

but reminds them that he is not to be found among the dead.

He is among the living. Go tell.

Go tell the disciples. You will see him, in Galilee.

But they *don't*. They run. They are terrified and amazed.

They have no words.

All they know is that the whole world

has just turned absolutely upside down.

End of story.

Oh, Christians came along later and added some alternative endings to

Mark's gospel

but this is where Mark came skidding to an abrupt full stop.

Silence. Amazement. Shattering fear.

Mary Jane and I worked so hard these past six Sundays to lay out the final week in Jesus' earthly life in Jerusalem so that *all* of us could connect the dots.

We have to come into the story whole or we'll miss the point,

like the disciples missed the point.

Traditional Christian teaching tends to separate the politics of Holy Week

from the pious understanding

and makes of that reality Jesus called the "kingdom of God" something for the next life.

We have tried to paint a richer tapestry as we have listened very carefully to Mark's telling of the story.

**Sunday's** march into Jerusalem was an **anti-imperial demonstration** that God's kingdom is very unlike all earthly kingdoms.

**Monday's** march into the temple was a **prophetic public demonstration** that God's house is not only about going for worship but equally for working for justice.

**Tuesday's** arguments with scholars and priests and attorneys was about what **really belongs to God** and **what really belongs to Caesar**.

Well?

If the earth and everything in it is God's, then what is left for Caesar?

Give Caesar his coin.

Give God your life.

**Wednesday's** anointing by the woman is the bright spot in the week for Jesus,

surrounded by disciples who will not understand and opponents who will not relent.

**Thursday's** meal is a new covenant

- signed and sealed in blood -  
about living in the kingdom of God,  
*even as Jesus submits to the forces of the kingdom of this world  
who abuse and misuse him.*

**Friday's** suffering and death is *not* about paying off a God who intends to murder the son, not at all.

Friday's execution is about the way of the **world playing its trump card**, giving it its best shot, having its way with him.

**Easter** is about God's taking all the horror and fear of Friday  
and bundling it up in vindication and glory.

Easter is *never* about cute little bunnies and  
bonnets and the blooming flowers of spring  
as the great theologians of Hallmark would have us believe.

Easter is God's saying, "Jesus was right all along."

If you look, you will see him.

Do not look among the dead for him, he is not there.

Jesus is among the living.

We come to the center of Christianity when we look into the tomb. I think that *most* people peer inside,

turn around,

shut the door,

smile,

and walk away.

They have seen Jesus, wrapped up and secured.

Religion, for them, is about keeping the rules of decency, prudence, and self-respect. Their faith doesn't have much to do with the moral choices with which they are confronted.

They never stop to think how their faith intersects with their politics.

And they behave themselves so they will have a shot at heaven when they die.

I think they are absolutely wrong.

When those who *seriously give everything they have and are* into following Jesus look into the tomb

they don't see him at all.

He is alive.

Nothing is more exciting than that, nor more important.

They are the ones who take to heart that teaching about seeking first the kingdom of God.

For them, Christianity is not about being good,  
it is about being born again, being transformed,  
turning *away* from the way of the world  
with its empires and domination  
and turning *to* Jesus' way of becoming a servant,  
taking up a cross,  
laying down a life,  
coming to him who makes the burden lighter,  
trusting him as he trusted God all the way to the cross.

The life of Jesus is not about making us happy or content.

It is about dying and being made new -

a painful process that costs us our pride,  
our resentments, our self-seeking, self-serving ways,  
our laziness and our envy.

It makes us humble, knowing *we* can't do it,  
trusting God to make up the difference, with joy and thanksgiving.

It is about making us *passionate* about the *politics of justice* in this  
world, and *hungry* for God in our lives.

It's about taking up crosses and following.

Paul wrote,

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is  
Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:19-20)

Baptism is our ritualized dying and rising.

We become a new self, a new creation.

"If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation. (2 Cor. 5:17)

The path of personal transformation is the only way of following Jesus that  
means anything.

Jesus died because of **politics**. His **passion** was the kingdom of God.

His is the world the prophets dreamed of -

a world where everybody has enough  
and the systems of government and education and religion and society

are fair.

It is God's dream born in the heart of justice.

Jesus' passion for justice got him killed  
but God vindicated him.

When we say that Jesus is Lord we are saying that the empire and the emperor are not Lord.

Lordship is reserved for Jesus who is like a light shining in the darkness.

Easter is where it comes home:

if Jesus is raised means that all the things he taught were right and God said, "I approve this message" then those who claim to follow him have to take him *seriously* every day, in every decision they make about *what they will buy* and *how they will vote* and the *causes they will support*.

Followers seek first the kingdom of God.

Followers live into the prayer: "Thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven."

Followers see a deeply religious vision of life,

a deep centering in God that includes radical trust in Jesus.

Followers take their prayers seriously

and their worship is about listening to the voice of God

and then bowing down in humble, reverent obedience.

Followers understand that the things God calls them to are beyond their strength,

testing their devotion,

requiring them to look to God for competence,

for they do not have the power on their own.

No wonder the first reaction is to go fleeing out from the resurrection moment when God reaches in and grabs us,

to go running away in terror and amazement,

to discover that we have not the words to express that cataclysmic change in which we know that the whole world has just turned upside down.

Good Friday shows us how powerful the forces arrayed against the kingdom of God are.

Easter shows us how powerful God is.

Christians say,

"I accept Jesus as my Lord and the world's savior."

They recognize that calling him Lord means they come under his orders.

They know that calling him the savior of the world means

that he challenges the politics of the world,

built on greed,

self-serving power,

domination

and violence.

We started a few Sundays ago following Jesus

riding into the Holy City on a donkey.

Now we follow terrified and amazed women,

startled to find that he has escaped even death itself,

gone back into Galilee,  
appearing again and again to those who follow, transforming the world.

The question is:

shall we follow after him,  
or will we be among those who, disbelieving,  
have turned aside and closed up the tomb  
and gone back to business as usual.

Jesus is alive!

Thanks be to God!