



University Christian Church – Austin

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Hosanna!

Palm Sunday, b, April 5, 2009

Mark 1:1-11

I hope you did not miss the opportunity to celebrate on Wednesday. You did know, didn't you, that Wednesday was the 30th anniversary of one of our age's gifts to the world of sport, bungee jumping? It was April 1, 1979 when David Kirke and his friends in Bristol who were members of the Oxford University Dangerous Sports Club attached an elastic band from the Clifton suspension Bridge and the other end to Kirke. Kirke then climbed the edge of the bridge, did a backflip off, and plummeted much of the 250 foot drop towards the river and most importantly survived. Now, I think most of us might categorize that sport as a form of lunacy, but you have to admit it takes courage and tremendous trust.

We gather this morning to celebrate another who engaged in what many would consider lunacy- some have called it intentional suicide, but who also demonstrated enormous courage and tremendous trust, this trust in God's power to redeem and to save. For a long while Jesus had let his disciples know that there would be a time coming when he would face head-on the powers that be: the religious powers of the day at the Temple and the temporal powers of day in the Roman army.

Now, His followers and the general public had seen in this Jesus amazing abilities to do miraculous things. He had healed people of various diseases. He made food suddenly multiply in the face of the need of 5000. He raised people from the dead! He walked on water. What was it that this man could not do?

So as Jesus moved westward from Jericho to the east of the city of Jerusalem it is not hard to understand that his fame preceded him and why it is that the crowds of people were so excited to receive him. Talk about being a rock star! Jesus was the biggest news and about the only good news that the Galilean and Judean peasants knew. It makes perfect sense that they would expect of Jesus the fulfillment of their grandest dream - that the Lord God would send them a Messiah, a leader, one who would throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and free the people of Israel once again to live as God desired, free in their own land.

- Was it coincidence that Jesus was arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, that greatest of times in Israel's history when God broke the yoke of Egyptian oppression and set the Israelites free?
- Was it coincidence that Jesus chose that time of year when Jerusalem swelled from its normal 40,000 inhabitants to five times that number to 200,000 people from all over that part of the Middle East coming together, remembering how God had freed them once, yearning for that freedom again?
- Was it a coincidence that Jesus had chosen this time to come to Jerusalem when he and everyone else knew that the Romans would be sending a garrison from Caesarea to help keep the peace and that these

soldiers would be vastly outnumbered by the pilgrims yearning for freedom from Rome?

No, no, these were just too many coincidences. The people believed -- with good rationale-- that this is the time Jesus had chosen to lead the rebellion to oust the Romans from Palestine.

If I had been director of the movie, I would have Jesus cresting the hill, the Mount of Olives on his way down into Jerusalem at sunrise. Yes, sunrise that would be the time. People would be camping out both within and outside the city walls of Jerusalem. They would be smoke coming up from the evening camp fires all around. And there at the top of the Mount of Olives all of the city and all this the surrounding areas could look up and see the outline of Jesus riding the donkey – the sun at his back- and the throngs spreading their cloaks on the road and waving their palm branches, shouting “Hosanna, blessed is the name of the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

But it wasn't heaven they were interested in. It was very earthly revolution they anticipated. If I was director of the movie, we would cut to the joyful faces of the peasants around the campfires shouting out there allegiance to their champion, Jesus, in the same way that tomorrow we will be shouting out our allegiance to Michigan State or the University of North Carolina . But the stakes were so much higher for these Palestinians. If their champion lost, they would all suffer the brutal reprisal of an angered Rome.

Then I'd switch the camera to focus on one of the Roman soldiers...standing by his Centurion, both looking at Jesus on the Hill and the crowd's joyous reaction.

The soldier would sharpen his broadsword while his centurion pounded his fist into the palm of his hand. “We'll show that Jesus who is in charge around here,” he'd say.

And then I would switch this scene just outside Jerusalem's western wall to the only major road that runs from Caesarea on the western seacoast to Jerusalem. You wouldn't see anything at first, but you would hear the jangle of a horse's bridle, then the thump, thump, thump of hundreds of soldier's sandals, and the squeak of leather saddle pads – all growing louder – until around the bend appears wave after wave of Roman reinforcements cresting the hill also at sunrise -- so that the yellow- orange, intense illumination highlights the commanding capabilities of this army to create whatever kind of order the Romans desired.

And the scene was set for the confrontation that would begin on Palm Sunday and stretched out through the week, a confrontation that would pit a powerful agent of God against a powerful agent of the world in a struggle to the death.

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Now, you should be thankful this morning that you live in a society where the rule of the church's clergy extends little further than the makeup of Sunday worship, because if you gave us preachers free rein, we'd likely lock up the church doors at about this time, making sure that none could leave. We would have you spend hours for several days focusing on each day of holy week, to dig so much more deeply into what transpired each day of the week we now call “holy.” A couple of years ago Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan wrote a 200 page book covering these days in the life of Jesus, the disciples the citizens of Jerusalem

and the agents of the Roman Empire. Riveting. Simply riveting. It is almost too much to absorb in a week & certainly far too much to recall in one sermon. It is the central story of the Christian faith and we all should know it and know it well.

But the great value in studying and meditating on this most important week in our religious history, is not that we understand this or that particular aspect of what happened and why. The great value is in recognizing that the same forces, the same motivations, the same reality that is described in that week is what you and I know every week. Things aren't so much better now. The kingdom of God that Jesus spoke of, demonstrated, inaugurated in his coming was -- if anything -- closer then than now.

For you see, at that time both Jesus and his earliest disciples firmly believed that the inbreaking of the kingdom of God and all its power and glory had already begun and that the current form of the world would be passing away -- and soon. They were able to run the race of faith without great concern for tomorrow:

for building institutions;

for providing for the passing along a culture;

for propagating a next generation;

for instilling values for the long-term;

because none of that was going to matter. They were freed in a way that we cannot understand to live in the moment of each day as if it was perhaps the final test of faith.

But you and I lived 2000 years later and we know that the world did not come to a new, God-ruled existence. Oh, certainly, individuals have been transformed, but the world **as a whole** is very far from what God desires for us.

There are two responses to this situation that Christians have taken, and this is likely why movies are much on my mind. For one of them was captured clearly in the 2004 movie the *Passion of the Christ* directed by Mel Gibson. You remember all of the cultural turmoil around that one don't you? Many were outraged at the gore and brutality in the film. Christians who held that view largely dismiss the notion that a good and loving God would ever condone, much less require, the blood sacrifice of Jesus. But whether you applauded or deplored this retelling of the story, you must admit that what the movie did in a powerful way was to put forward the claim that **it was the pain and the blood** of this dying Jesus that paves the way for those who **believe in Jesus** to both be forgiven and be reconciled with God. That claim is embraced by some and repulsive to others, but we must recognize that it is one way the scriptures teach us of a path back to God.

The other understanding is summarized in another movie. This one goes back to 1988. The movie was Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The movie was a mostly faithful rendition of the book by the same name written by Nikos Kazantzakis. This movie also provoked a storm, but for a very different reason. If you recall the movie what made it so controversial was that it dared to portray Jesus as a very human being, repeatedly tempted to act out of human emotions and lusts, but who finally resists in each case and so by virtue of his faithfulness to the very high calling from God that he received, becomes the model of faith for the rest of us to follow. In this view **we are not called to believe in**

this Jesus, but to believe like him. It is **not trusting in Jesus** that we find ourselves, but **in trusting God like Jesus did** that we find the strength:

- to carry on faithfully in spite of unrelenting temptation to find an easier path;
- to leap from the bridge with trust that the bungee will hold;
- to find in God's promises and God's very presence, courage enough to persevere through every trial.

Yes, if you gave us preachers the power to do so, we would lock the doors on the church this week, with every to keep everyone inside. We'd be:

- showing you movies and evoking discussions;
- working through some important disagreements together;
- spending time in prayer;
- digging into our Bibles in ways that are so uncommon among us, because this week, this essential week, is not to be missed.

>The eye-opening, heart rending meanings of this week are not be trivialized;

> we dare not float from the high of a palm processional to the high of Easter's glorious morning without painfully traversing and reliving the drama; our own path to salvation is pioneered this week by Jesus Christ.

For the message of this week is that only if we are willing to take the leap of faith with Jesus – or perhaps, like Jesus – will we survive the fall & spring back to New Life.