

Homily for Palm Sunday (Sunday of the Passion), 4-5-20
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Jesus is dead. His lifeless body has been sealed inside the tomb. Soldiers are stationed just outside to make sure no one steals his corpse. Mercy has been condemned, compassion has been crucified, and hope has been destroyed.

This is where the Passion of our Lord ends. But it's not where we began today. We began with celebration, with waving palm fronds and shouting hosannas. The King of Glory entered the holy city, riding on a humble donkey, surrounded by crowds of his ecstatic followers.

It's a long walk from the joy of Palm Sunday to the despair of Holy Saturday, or Easter Eve. This is the walk of Holy Week. This is the most important, most transformative time of the Christian year.

I have two Palm Sunday confessions to make. The first is this: ever since I became an Episcopalian 10 years ago, I have found our liturgy for this day very disorienting. From joyful hosannas to cries of grief, all in one morning? It feels like worship whiplash!

This year is the first time it has really made sense to me. This year, it feels right. Maybe it feels right because, with the social distancing and sheltering-in-place and daily press conferences and changing recommendations, we're all riding an emotional roller coaster anyway!

Maybe it feels right because, over the last couple of weeks, we've seen for ourselves how quickly people and communities can change, how fickle reality is.

And maybe it feels right because this year, all the emotions of Christ's Passion have landed right on our doorsteps whether we like it or not: the bewilderment, the fear, the uncertainty, the separation, the grief... and we know there may be more to come.

So this is the first year -- for me -- that it all fits; from palms to passion, all in one day.

My 2nd Palm Sunday confession is far more embarrassing, because it reveals one of my biggest character flaws. You see, in a normal year -- any other year -- when we're gathering in person, sitting side by side in the pews in our beautiful sanctuaries, Palm Sunday is the last day we see our familiar worshipping community.

The pews are full of the faithful on Palm Sunday. But the next Sunday, Easter Sunday, they're way more full. Easter Sunday is the Feast of the Resurrection, the holiest day of the Christian year; and along with Christmas, it's when we see our highest attendance numbers.

I have conflicting impulses when it comes to those big Christmas and Easter crowds. This is something I don't like about myself. On Easter Sunday, I am genuinely happy to see those folks I haven't seen since Christmas Eve. But I may also wonder, *Where have you been for the last 3 and a half months? Or, to put it more plainly, If you really believe he died on a cross and rose again for you, why can't you show up on Sunday morning for him?*

Writing down these words and speaking them aloud helps me acknowledge how ridiculous and self-righteous I can be. People miss church for all kinds of reasons: maybe to visit a beloved family member, or run a 5k raising money for a great cause, or even because they are struggling – struggling to manage and care for a household, or struggling with depression or anxiety or feelings of inadequacy, or struggling to figure out what they believe. The truth is, life is hard and we're all just doing the best we can.

And here again, this year is different. This year presents a holy opportunity: for me to lay down my judgmental streak, and more importantly, for our churches, our Holy Week to be truly open, truly accessible, in a way they've never been before...

This is all very strange -- this internet live-stream worshipping at home -- and us regular churchgoers feel like we're sacrificing so much. But there's a hidden blessing in all this, a holy surprise: folks are sharing in our worship this morning who would not be present in the sanctuary if this were any other year. Our prayers, and our liturgy, and this amazing story, the story that turned the world upside down, are reaching new people, different people, than ever before. And thanks be to God!

My prayer, for the regular crowd, the Christmas & Easter crowd, and the live-stream crowd -- for all of us -- is that this year, of all years, we will experience the difference between Easter the holiday and Easter the holy day. Easter without Holy Week is Easter the holiday. It's cheap plastic eggs and pastel ribbons and chocolate bunnies. It's pretty, and fun, and makes for great family photos, but it's not holy.

Easter the holy day is the Day of the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It's Christ's victory over death, it's the beginning of the reign of God, it's the reason we sing praises in times of trial and we proclaim hope in times of despair.

Easter is everything to us – but in order to get there, we must walk through Holy Week. There can be no Resurrection without crucifixion, and there can be no crucifixion without betrayal. Easter will come whether we experience Holy Week or not; but the true experience of Easter, the experience of Resurrection and victory over death and despair in our own lives will not come if we do not walk with Jesus through His Passion. Christ cannot rise again for us if he has not died for us, and he cannot die for us if he never really lived for us.

As we embark on the Holy Week journey, let us open our hearts to our Lord. Let us forget ourselves, that we may remember Him, and know and love Him more fully. Let us forget ourselves, and walk with Jesus through his betrayal and suffering and death; and let us find ourselves with Him again on Easter morning. Amen.