

Sermon Draft

Text: Mark 14:1-11

Sermon: Palm Sunday 2018

Palm Sunday is celebrated as the Sunday of the Passion. Our Old Testament lesson begins: *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”*

The Sunday of the Passion is the Sunday before the week of Jesus’ passion, the Sunday before his suffering and death. And Jesus begins it by riding into Jerusalem. In Mark’s Gospel the account of Jesus’ passion takes two full chapters, chapters 14 and 15.

We hear from Mark at the outset of chapter 14 that the chief priests and the scribes were seeking ways to arrest Jesus secretly and have him put to death. We know, therefore, what these chapters are going to be about. They are going to be about Jesus’ road to death.

This road-to-death story, this passion story, is sandwiched between two stories of women involved with Jesus' life. It was Wednesday of Holy Week. Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. While he was at table, a woman approached him with an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard. It was expensive stuff. It represented one year's wages. The woman broke the jar and poured the ointment over his head. The disciples were shocked and began to reproach the woman. Jesus defended her action. "She has anointed my body for burial," he told the disciples. *"And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her"* (Mark 14:9).

Messiah means "anointed one." The people of Israel had waited centuries for the "anointed one." But they did not recognize Jesus. This woman, however, this woman who anointed Jesus feet, recognized him. She understood something that the disciples and others failed to understand. She understood that Jesus was to be a suffering Messiah.

The story begins with this anonymous woman. It ends with the women who looked upon Jesus' crucifixion from afar. But they were there! The disciples have all fled. They have all denied their Master. But the women are there. They followed Joseph of Arimathea when he took Jesus' body for burial. "*Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid*" (Mark 15:47). The next week they will be there when he is raised from the dead.

But the disciples. Ah, that is another story. An incredible story. At least the way that Mark tells it. They do not seem to understand any part of this journey of Jesus to the cross. We have already heard that they reproached the woman who anointed him. And Jesus reproached them. They did not understand.

And then one of the twelve, named Judas, steps to the center stage of the story, steps to the center stage to betray the Lord. He was glad to take the money. But there is something even more incredible about this incident of betrayal.

As Jesus sat with his disciples at the Last Supper, he said to the disciples, *"Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me!"* They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, *"Is it I?"* (Mark 14:18-19) They all were suspect, in their own minds.

After the supper, Jesus went with his disciples to the Mount of Olives. *"And Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away ...' "* (Mark 14:27). Jesus knew that they would all betray him. Peter, of course, the leader, denied it with vigor. *"'Even though they all fall away, I will not.'* And Jesus said to him, *'Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.'* But Peter said vehemently, *'If I must die with you, I will not deny you'"* (Mark 14:29-30). Mark adds for our information that all the disciples, all, said the same thing. They would die rather than deny their Lord. Those were their words. Their deeds, however, would soon undo them.

The scene shifts again. We are in Gethsemane. Jesus has come to pray. He knew what suffering lay ahead of him. It was for this hour that he had come. But it was not easy. *"Abba, Father," he cried, "all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt"* (Mark 14:36). Jesus is to be a suffering Messiah. The disciples could not comprehend that at all. Jesus himself struggled mightily with his obedience to God in this hour.

Jesus struggled. The disciples slept. When Jesus had finished praying, he came to his disciples. They were asleep. Peter and James and John, the leaders of the twelve, were asleep. *"Could you not watch one hour?"* Jesus said to them. Obviously, they could not do so. And they slept not just once but three times! Their eyes were very heavy, Mark tells us. As we hear the story, we see that their eyes were heavy indeed. Their eyes were blinded to the reality of what was taking place before them. They could not see the Messiah in their suffering Master.

Soon Judas came leading a crowd with swords and clubs. He betrayed Jesus with a kiss. The crowd began to lay their hands on Jesus in order to seize him. There was a brief scuffle. Jesus quickly put a stop to it. The hour had now come with finality. It was too late for struggle. And so, the crowd bound him off to the high priest of the Jews that he might be tried. And the disciples? They had all said that they would die before they would deny him. In this place we read simply that, "*... they all forsook him, and fled*" (Mark 14:50). They all vowed to stand firm. They all forsook him and fled. That is the last we hear about the twelve in Mark's Gospel. The story of Jesus' inner group, the story of the twelve disciples, ends in denial. Only Peter's story, only the story of the leader of the twelve, is yet to be played out before us.

Peter did manage to follow Jesus to the place of the trial by the council of Jewish elders. One of the maids of the high priest spotted him there. "*You were also with the Nazarene, Jesus,*" she said to him. "*But Peter denied it, saying, 'I neither know nor understand what you mean'*" (Mark 14:68a). But the maid would not be stilled.

Again, she identified him. Again, Peter denied her claim. By now many of the bystanders had caught on. *"‘Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.’ But (Peter) began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, ‘I do not know this man of whom you speak.’ And immediately the cock crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And (Peter) broke down and wept"* (Mark 14:70b-72).

The tragedy of the twelve disciples is now complete. One had betrayed Jesus to the authorities, ten of them have fled for their lives and Peter stands weeping. And that is the last word we hear from any of the disciples in Mark's Gospel. Mark has painted a consistent picture of these disciples. He has clearly shown us that the disciples could not comprehend that Jesus was to be a suffering Messiah. When the suffering took place, when the events of the passion played themselves out before them, their eyes were blinded. They denied their Lord.

There is only one faith confession in this whole Passion story, according to Mark. Mark paints for us a story of consistent ignorance and denial on the part of the disciples. But there is one man who seems to catch a vision of what is transpiring before his very eyes. That man was a Roman centurion who stood guard at the cross. He heard Jesus' cry of God-forsakenness. *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Mark 15:34). That was Jesus' cry. Betrayed by his disciples and forsaken by God, Jesus breathed his last. The Roman centurion beheld these events. *"Truly this man was a Son of God!"* he said.

Mark's story of Jesus' passion is a story filled with reversals. The disciples betray Jesus and a Roman soldier confesses him! That is a real reversal of form. It does not seem right. Jesus' disciples struggled before. There was so much of it that they just could not figure out. Their Master was anointed for burial as a sign of his Messianic identity. Their Master suffered much at the hands of the religious authorities on his way to triumph. Their Master was God-forsaken on his way to resurrection into God's eternal presence.

Their Master walked into the darkness that he might become the light of the world. Their Master died a criminal's death so that a Roman centurion and all who believe with him might have eternal life.

No wonder the disciples stumbled, doubted, and betrayed him. But their betrayal is also reversed! Jesus, after all, did not betray his betrayers! On the other side of Jesus' grave these disciples served him still. Peter became the rock once more. Together these once-fallen disciples helped found the Church of Jesus Christ. Together they helped spread the good news of Jesus to the known world. Indeed, Jesus did not betray his betrayers.

Reversal! That seems to be the theme of Mark's passion story. And therein lies our hope. We understand Jesus' fate so very well. Jesus suffered at the hands of the religious authorities. Every human life is lived on intimate terms with suffering. We know too well the taste of suffering. Jesus joins us in our suffering. He joins us in order that he might reverse our suffering through his triumph over death.

We know, as well, the feel of God-forsakenness. There are those times in our lives, in all our lives, when we feel Godforsaken. Jesus joins us in our God-forsakenness. He joins us in order that he might reverse our God-forsakenness through his resurrection into God's eternal presence.

We know what it is like to walk in darkness. Jesus joins us in order that he might reverse our darkness through the shining ray he casts upon us as the light of the world.

We know the sting of death. That reality is ever before us. It haunts our every step. Jesus joins us in our death-march. He joins us in order to reverse our death-march through his gift of eternal life. And thus Holy Week begins: ***“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey***

Amen.