



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## WINNING ENTRY

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Anyone play any great April Fool's pranks this morning before church? I can't remember the last time April Fool's Day fell on a Sunday. But it doesn't seem to matter too much if it does, because nobody has to rush home for a special April Fool's Day dinner. We don't have to put up April Fool's decorations or sing April Fool's carols. It's really a great, low maintenance holiday. You don't have to buy a thing! You don't have to send any cards or wrap any presents or go visit relatives. You just have to be on your guard.

I tried to find out where the whole concept originated. No one's really sure because believe it or not, it goes back hundreds of years. Some people think it started in France in 1582. That was the year Pope Gregory changed the start of the calendar from the end of March to the first of January. People who didn't keep up with the news and who stuck with the old calendar were made fun of for treating April 1<sup>st</sup> as the new year.

In 1983, Joseph Boskin, a professor at Boston University, wrote an article offering another theory. He claimed that April Fool's day went clear back to the Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine, when a group of court jesters and fools told the emperor that they could do a better job of running things. Constantine was amused by that, and he allowed a jester named Kugel to be king for one day. Kugel passed an edict calling for absurdity on that day, and the custom became an annual event.

Professor Boskin said, "In a way it was a very serious day. In those times fools were really wise men. It was the role of jesters to put things in perspective with humor."

The Associated Press ran that article and a number of papers picked it up. The only problem with that theory was that Boskin made the whole thing up. A couple weeks after the fact, it came out that he had been playing his own April Fool's joke on the media and everyone had fallen for it.

So we still don't know exactly where it came from. I'm sure it doesn't go back to Jesus' time. But there are some pieces to our story today that to an outsider would look like an April Fool's joke. For starters, it all centers around a donkey, which let's face it – in our culture is pretty much the mascot for everything foolish. It's hard to take a donkey seriously.

On top of that, you have all these people in the story who seem to be under the mistaken impression that Jesus is going to be their new king. There's this big, happy parade, but they don't know that a few days later, instead of being crowned king, Jesus was going to die. So if you didn't know anything more about Palm Sunday, it could seem like everyone has fallen for somebody's hoax, or at the very least that they've misunderstood what's happening.

Was that first Palm Sunday a big joke? Of course it wasn't. As Christians, we love Palm Sunday because it's the one time people treated Jesus the way he deserved. It's great. The question is more one of time. Why did it happen when it did? Why a big celebration right before his death sentence? How did that part of the story fit with the rest of Jesus' mission? Let's take a look at the events as found in Mark 11.

### **Mark 11:1-11**

*As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'"*

*They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,*

*"Hosanna!"*

*"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

*"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"*

*"Hosanna in the highest!"*

*Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.*

We didn't have a lot of money for fireworks when I was growing up, so any that we did have on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July were prized possessions. We had to make the most of them and stretch them out. We didn't usually have the good ones from the reservation: we just would buy a family value pack at the corner stand, the kind with a lot of Piccolo Petes and ground blossoms and sparklers.

But one year we got something different. We got a pack that had a grand finale that was a cardboard cutout of a clown. You stuck a cigar in his mouth, then you lit it and it was supposed to burn down and explode.

Now THAT'S entertainment. I couldn't wait to get to that one. I was excited to see something so destructive and funny at the same time. We got it all set up, my dad lit the cigar...and nothing happened. No kaboom. No sparkle. Just a smoldering stump of a cigar. We waited, then waited some more, thinking maybe it had to burn a while.

I remember going to bed and STILL waiting, listening...wondering why the grand finale had fizzled.

There's a side to this story that seems like a grand finale that fizzled. Look how it ended: Jesus arrived at the temple, looked around, then went home because it was late. All the hoopla died down to nothing, leaving you wondering what it was all about in the first place.

This is the start of what's often called Holy Week, the last days leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. All four of the gospel writers begin recounting events from this entrance into the city, called the Triumphal Entry. They all consider it an important moment to remember, a marker to commemorate something significant.

Up until this point, Jesus has shied away from the limelight. After he healed people, he often told them to keep quiet about who he was. He has slipped away from the crowd on more than one occasion. But here he welcomes the open recognition, in fact, he seems to be setting up the situation to make sure his arrival is noticed.

Not only that, he gets very, very specific with his instructions: Two disciples are sent to a certain village, where they will find a specific donkey. He tells them exactly what to do and the precise words to say. It is one of the rare instances where Jesus seems to be micro-managing the situation. Clearly, he has a plan in mind.

If the whole Triumphal Entry was Jesus' idea, then the response of the crowd was no mistake. They may not have understood the real reasons for what they were saying and doing, but they weren't misled or being punked.

In fact I would go so far as to say that the way the Triumphal Entry happened was the only way Jesus COULD enter Jerusalem that week. It makes four important statements about who Jesus is. One that I see as being extremely important is that Jesus is

### **The Willing Unvictim**

By the time we get to chapter 11, Mark has already recorded for us three times when Jesus plainly predicted to his disciples that he would soon be killed. These are his words from the last time he told them:

### **Mark 10:33-34**

*"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."*

It is very obvious that Jesus knew what was coming. Death awaited him when he got to Jerusalem. When you have that kind of advance notice, you essentially have two choices. You can fight it, making your killers come get you and drag you to your doom. Or, a second option would be to sneak into town, hoping nobody sees you so you can slip away and avoid the inevitable.

But Jesus chose a third route. He made it clear that he was nobody's victim. He entered town like someone in charge, ready for whatever came his way. When he talked to his disciples about giving up his life, he said this:

### **John 10:17-18**

*No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.*

We normally point to the resurrection as the moment when Jesus conquered death and the devil. I think Palm Sunday shows us that even before the Cross, Jesus had the upper hand. **The Triumphal Entry puts an exclamation point on the fact that Christ is the victor, not the victim.** His coming death was going to be *his* triumph – not the devil's. He would not allow the cross to become a symbol of failure – it was his hard-fought win over evil. He laid down his life – it was not taken from him.

Palm Sunday sets the tone and tells the world that Jesus met the crisis head-on, willingly and confidently. I love what the kids sang about this morning. When critics were telling everyone to be quiet, Jesus said back, "If they don't praise God, the rocks will." It HAD to go down this way. This is Christ coming as the un-victim, declaring to the world that he was fully in charge.

Aren't you glad that the God we serve is not dominated by evil in the world? He always maintains his command and his ability to face the darkness and overcome it.

Probably the most influential Christian thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Karl Barth. I quoted him briefly last week, talking about God's kingdom. He was right in the thick of things in Germany during World War II, helping the church take a stand against Hitler. He saw incredible evil up close during his lifetime.

Karl Barth died on December 10, 1968 at the age of 82, and on the very last evening of his life, he had a phone call from a life long friend named Eduard Thurneysen. They talked a lot about the enormous problems in the world. But Karl Barth concluded that conversation with these last words to his friend: "Don't be discouraged! Never! Jesus is in charge!"

I want that kind of confidence – to be able to look at the worst the world has to offer and know that Jesus is firmly in control. He’s no victim of what’s going on. He acts on his own accord and is not held hostage by anyone or anything.

A second point Palm Sunday makes is that Jesus is

### **The Promise Keeper**

For thousands of years, pilgrims to Jerusalem at Passover passed down the same traditions as they made their way up to the city. In fact, many of them still happen today. I was reading a contemporary author named David McKenna, who was in Israel recently. He was eating breakfast at a hotel on the Mount of Olives when all of a sudden he heard all this shouting outside. He thought there was some sort of terrorist attack going down. But the waiter said, “Oh no – that’s just pilgrims as they round the corner and catch their first sight of the city.”

Since ancient times, that bend in the road has been a high point of anticipation and emotion. It’s the big payoff after the long climb. The Bible tells us Jesus wept when he saw the sight.

Centuries before Jesus, the Jews developed a whole set of songs that people would sing on their climb toward Jerusalem. These would have been as familiar to them as Christmas carols are to us today – they were part of the culture, and they were called the Hallel Psalms. One of those was Psalm 118. In it, we find these words:

#### **Psalm 118:19-27**

*Open for me the gates of righteousness;  
I will enter and give thanks to the LORD.  
This is the gate of the LORD  
through which the righteous may enter.  
I will give you thanks, for you answered me;  
you have become my salvation.*

*The stone the builders rejected  
has become the capstone;  
the LORD has done this,  
and it is marvelous in our eyes.  
This is the day the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*

*O LORD, save us; (In Hebrew, that’s Hosanna)  
O LORD, grant us success.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.  
From the house of the LORD we bless you.  
The LORD is God,  
and he has made his light shine upon us.*

*With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession  
up to the horns of the altar.*

You can hear all kinds of connections in that Psalm to what happened with Jesus. Not only was this the song the people were singing on Palm Sunday – it even talks about having branches in your hand and making your way to the temple.

More importantly, it makes reference to the stone the builders rejected. That's Jesus. He'll point that out himself in the next chapter, and Peter will pick up on that in his letter to the church as well. The prayer the people had sung for centuries was being answered in the person of Jesus, riding into town that day. This is the day the Lord has made, Jesus was saying. This is the day of salvation.

He also wraps in another prophecy, from Zechariah 9:9 and 11:

**Zechariah 9:9, 11**

*Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!*

*Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!*

*See, your king comes to you,  
righteous and having salvation,  
gentle and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey...*

*...As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,  
I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.*

Here Jesus gives a physical, concrete reference for people to connect the dots. He chooses to ride on a donkey colt – EXACTLY like it had said in the prophecy from hundreds of years earlier. That's a highly unusual entrance for anyone to the feast. Most pilgrims would make the last part of the journey on foot. Important officials would choose something more noble like a horse to ride in on. People would come to realize that Jesus wanted them to see him as fulfilling that prophecy. The donkey is a statement that says, "God is keeping his promise right here and now. Your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation."

What an important and joyful reminder that God is faithful.

**Psalm 145:13**

*The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.*

Do you need a Palm Sunday moment of your own this morning? Are you feeling that God has abandoned you? Maybe you're so overwhelmed you can't see any way he's going to save you from your situation. Christ is here today, ready to come through the gates of your heart and tell you that God is faithful. He will provide. Jesus is a promise keeper, Jesus is the promise kept, and he promises to shine his light on you. There is hope because God is true to his word, and he proves it in this Triumphal Entry.

Another statement Palm Sunday makes is that Jesus is

### **The Great Untier**

I love the mission Jesus sends his two disciples on. If anything in this story sounds like an April Fool's trick, this is it. It reminds me of a scavenger hunt I went on in high school. We were trying to find certain people in a shopping mall who were in disguise, but to find them, we had to go up to complete strangers and say a code line. If they were part of the game, they'd say a certain response. If they weren't, they gave us strange looks and we felt pretty ridiculous.

Jesus tells these two disciples to go find a donkey they've never seen, take it away and tell complete strangers why they were taking it.

Now remember – Mark is our author here. Mark is the one who doesn't care much for details. He wants to keep the action moving. But here he slows down to give us all the particulars of the conversation and the instructions Jesus gave them.

The details are interesting, because Mark tells us they were looking for a donkey colt that had never been ridden. That wouldn't have been my first choice for a ride into town. I would have said, "Get me the most experienced beast you can find. Check its legs to make sure it's strong. Ask the owner if it has a nice, calm personality." I once had a bad experience with a horse that got skittish on the trail, causing a big scene. So my vote would have been for a donkey with a long list of credentials and a good track record.

But Jesus asks for the opposite – a colt who is an unknown commodity. Then he specifically says to his disciples, "It will be tied up. I want you to untie it." And Mark repeats that a second time with the actions of the disciples. "The colt was tied up. They untied it."

Here's what I'm trying to get at: We've all got donkeys in our lives that have never been used by God. Experiences, fears, talents, resources. We've got these untried bits of ourselves that are like baby colts that we wouldn't think God could ever have a need for. Or we think that way about ourselves in general. "Oh I don't know my Bible well enough." "I can't pray very well." "I haven't been a Christian long enough." Isn't it good to know that Jesus specifically asked for the inexperienced, untested colt? He had the confidence to work with that.

But the colt was tied up. It had to be untied. He asked his disciples to carry out that task. He asks us to do the same thing – to go into our own hearts, find the colt, and release it to him.

Gustaf Aulén wrote, "The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil."

He wants those ropes CUT! He wants us set free and brought to him.

Our ropes can be anything. They can be the pressure on ourselves to live up to other people's expectations. They can be sins. Paul describes sin as being able to entangle us. Our ropes might be past failures.

Just like the disciples, Christ send us on a mission to do four things:

1. To find what we've never have seen
2. To recognize it as being useful to him
3. To untie it
4. To bring it to Jesus

We look in our own lives for things we've never seen or consider giving to God. We recognize it as being usable by him, we do the hard work of untying or releasing it and we take it Jesus.

There's always something more to find and bring to him. It's awesome to know that he can turn the untried and the untested into a vehicle that takes him where he wants to go.

He has an unusual destination in this story. As he rides the donkey further and the roar of the crowd dies down, everything appears to end on more of a whimper than a bang.

*Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.*

How is this meaningful? Wouldn't it have been better to have things crescendo to a dramatic finale?

Although it feels anticlimactic, I think even the conclusion of this story is making a point.

From the prophecy in Zechariah, we get the idea that the person riding the donkey into Jerusalem will be a new king. So one would naturally think that his destination in the city would be to Herod's Palace to confront the current ruler in some kind of showdown.

But the showdown Jesus is going to have isn't with the old system of government – it's with the old system of religion. Jesus is the new temple – he's the new center of connecting with God.

By the time he reaches the Temple, it seems the crowd has all left him. Mark gives us a picture of a very solitary Jesus looking around the Temple grounds. And he's met with silence. No one recognizes him or acknowledges him. It is a Temple that wasn't ready to receive him.

The crowd had been interested in the idea of Jesus, but they weren't all that interested in the real thing. If his business was with the temple instead of overthrowing the Romans, nobody really cared. They wanted him for their own purposes.

I'm guilty of the same attitude as the crowd. I want Jesus for my own idea of what he should do for me. But he's interested in being

### **The New Center**

He wants me to stick with him all the way to the heart of the matter, which is what's going on in my relationship with God. What's at the center of my life? Have I recognized him and given him the place he deserves?

The dictionary defines a fool as someone with little or no common sense. If there's anything about Palm Sunday where Jesus seems to play the fool, it's this conclusion with Jesus standing as a solitary figure, preparing to die to save the world. It makes no sense humanly speaking that one man who nobody was paying attention to that night could affect the entire universe through his death. And God knew it wouldn't be taken seriously.

### **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

*For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:*

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."*

*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom.*

Keeping his promises to people who didn't keep theirs. Willingly going to people who wanted to kill him. Finding a use for the untried and untested. Claiming to be the center even when nobody's around. That's the foolishness of God. But it's so much more brilliant and full of grace than any human mind could make up.

In a few moments, we'll celebrate God's foolishness on this April Fool's Day. As we get ready for that, I want you to take the little string you found on your chair this morning. As you can see, it has a knot in it.

The knot represents whatever it is in your life that needs untying. Maybe there's some part of you you haven't released to Christ. Maybe there's something you thought he

could never use. Maybe it is obligations and expectations that are holding you down so tightly you can't move.

Some of you need to follow Jesus' instructions and untie the rope. Others need Christ to do the untying for you. As we come to communion, I'm going to ask you to do one of two things. If you know there's something you need to release to Christ, untie your knot and bring it up with you when you come to take communion. You can just lay it at the foot of the cross as a symbol of offering it to him.

If you feel like there's a knot in your soul that you need him to untie, bring your string as is and lay it at the bottom of the cross. Use it to represent your request that he come and help you in your need.

And if you feel neither applies to you, let the string stand for some other person you know whose knots need untying and remember them before Christ today.