Rev. Susie Webster-Toleno Mark 11: 1-11; Mark 14: 3-9

Westminster West, Vermont Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29

April 5, 2020

*Palm Sunday*

Mark 11: 1-11

Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, “Why are you doing this?” just say this, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.” ’ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

‘Hosanna!

   Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

   Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Mark 14: 3-9

The Anointing at Bethany

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. But some were there who said to one another in anger, ‘Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.’ And they scolded her. But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 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.’

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O God our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

I think it can be acknowledged that this is a Palm Sunday like none I have ever celebrated. I know that we have not generally been a church that went too crazy with the Palm Sunday processional ... we could have, of course, but we haven’t for a few reasons: 1) it’s not really practical inside in a church whose center aisle is so very short ... 2) it doesn’t have a very big impact *outside* a church that isn’t a downtown church, with lots of potential (if unintentional) onlookers ... and ... 3) I, your minister, am the very image of a northern New Englander, and I remember feeling awfully foolish as a child when asked to participate in Palm Sunday pomp (it just felt so ... showy, you know?). I was a marching band kid, and I have *always* loved parades, but I’ve *never* been a fan of role plays (participating in them or watching them), or re-enactments, and the Palm Sunday events that I remember from my childhood felt more like that than like genuine parades. That last reason is a little embarrassing to admit at the moment, but it’s certainly part of why our own congregation’s traditions have evolved in such a toned down way.

And now, as I said ... we find ourselves in a very different position. A parade wouldn’t even really be possible this year ... and I have to admit it kind of almost makes me long for one. There was a move afoot in the Brattleboro Area Interfaith group to gather this afternoon ~ each in our own car ~ and have a procession through town honking and waving at the places where first responders and other front-line workers do their work ... the Fire Dept, Rescue and the Hospital, but also grocery stores and other places that are such lifelines right now. There was great enthusiasm for doing this from some quarters, but I was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea, and I admit that I was grateful when the police chief responded with a very gracious, “Thank you ... but please don’t. Please ... we know you’re grateful ... but the best way to thank us is to stay home.”

And I think I was grateful in part because I am not in the mood for a parade. I’m in the mood for connection: I’m practically desperate for us to be together again ... to hug those of you who like hugs, and to sing together unhampered by technology. It would be so meaningful to do our usual thing ... I can almost hear us: *All glory laud and honor to thee, redeemer king. To whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring ...* or, the one that is actually my favorite for the day ... *Ride on! Ride on in majesty! As crowds of people come to see, and shout hosannas, lifting high their praise for one about to die.*

Ah! There it is! *There* is the reason that a parade for Palm Sunday has never quite worked for me. It’s because we can’t *unknow* that which we know. At least, I can’t. I can’t quite focus on Palm Sunday in all of its pomp ... especially this year ... knowing what’s to come in the rest of the week. Knowing as we all do that the crowds who shouted *Hosanna* would later turn into the very same crowd as those who shouted *Crucify him!* There is to this day what an Orthodox priest once called “a glittering sadness” (as quoted by Sara Miles, with similar lack of attribution).

A glittering sadness ... and that’s why the second part of the reading is so helpful to me. The unnamed woman who pours out her precious ointment to give beauty to Jesus, seemingly knowing that he will need it. Her outlandish act of intimate connection and over-the-top generosity feels more right to me than ever. Jesus accepts the pomp of the parade (*who is this Jesus who can be fully present for that part of things, knowing what he knows?)* ... and he also accepts the woman’s pouring out for the sake of love, seeing it for the powerful and beautiful act that it is.

That woman, whoever she was ... she was aware of the glittering sadness, too. I don’t know about you, but I am tired ... tired of Zoom, tired of distance, tired of the four walls of my home despite the fact that I’m privileged to live in a home that contains a great deal of love, good food, and beautiful music. I want to gather with you. I want to sing with you, and I want to hug you if you’re a hugging person, and I want to pour out precious generosity for you and with you. In this deep fatigue ... this *Zoom* fatigue... the last thing I have the heart for is a parade, and the *second* to last thing I have the heart for is a long sermon. (*Phew!, right?*)

Nonetheless, I am not out of messages. I will tell you this: despite that “glittering sadness” of this day, I believe that we’re finding our way to a better path. Those of us who have walked with Jesus through the days of this strange, frightening, tragic Lent may even be learning something about the way of the cross ... and the fact that the only path to resurrection goes straight through the territory of despair, loss, betrayal, and abandonment ... the way of the cross passes straight through crucifixion and then through the painful pause of Holy Saturday before finally arriving at the dawn of a new day, where new life is waiting. And it is waiting. I can’t tell you what it looks like or exactly where we’ll find it, but I know in the very depths of my soul that resurrection is what awaits our world.

Sara Miles (author of “Take This Bread” and “Jesus Freak”).... wrote a guest essay a few years back on the wonderful website “My Journey with Jesus”: “Back when I first started going to church, a dozen years ago, I went around in a daze, as a friend told me later, “like a deer caught in the headlights.” I’d been blindsided by Jesus, who I didn’t believe in, but who, to my shock, had shown up anyway, quite alive, in a piece of bread. I used to come to church and sit during the early service, waiting for more bread, and halfway listening to the Scriptures or whatever the preacher was saying. I’d stare out the window, gazing at the tangle of green ivy and nasturtiums beyond in a spaced-out way. One day I noticed the window frames. They seemed to have a very peculiar construction. “Oh,” I thought, “Look at that. It’s a…cross! You can see a cross over everything… You can see everything through the cross… Wow, there’s a cross over the whole world!”

           I was unprepared, and undeserving, and stupid. But there is a cross over the whole world, and you can see everything through it. See the crowds, see the disciples, see Jesus: riding the donkey into Jerusalem, eating supper with friends, stumbling up the hill. And if you let your mind be made in the mind of Christ Jesus, you will stay beside him the whole way, because you see where all this is going.

           It is going toward love. It is going toward life. And it cannot be stopped.”

*Ride on! Ride on in majesty! For you have set your people free. And we, remembering all your pain, now meet again to hail your reign!*

(If we’re going to go on this journey this week ... this life ... we’ll need to be nourished. If we were gathered together right now, we’d pause to receive the offering, because we know it’s much harder to receive generosity if we’re consumed with clutching that which we think of as ours. If you haven’t sent Alison your offerings lately, I suggest that write yourself a note to do so, so we can continue our good work for God together.)