

“Hope”

Luke 22:14–27; Revelation 19:6–9

Holy Week and Easter shape our understanding of who we are as followers of Jesus. We are, as others have said, Easter people living in a Good Friday world. We are defined by the sacrifice and the gift of Jesus. It all begins with Palm Sunday. Of course, an argument could be made that it all begins with his baptism in the Jordan with the Spirit descending like a dove. Or it begins with his announcement in an out-of-the-way synagogue: “*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*” (Luke 4:21). Or maybe it all begins with an angelic announcement and birth in a back alley of a small town. Or, like John, maybe we should recognize that it all began at the beginning, the beginning of all things, when the plan was put in place that would result in Jesus’ death.

The Scriptures we have heard this morning give us two pictures of two meals, both of which are centered on Jesus. The meal in the gospel of Luke foreshadows another meal. The Last Supper is the last meal of the Passover era and the first meal of the Lord’s Supper era. While eating one meal Jesus looks forward to another meal. You could say that we live between those two meals.

On Palm Sunday we also remember that Jesus is King, as we begin Holy Week and as we anticipate the new heaven and the new earth promised in Revelation 21. The Lord’s Supper unites us with this promise and calls us to live as a foretaste of the reunion of heaven and earth. Palm Sunday also features the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom by remembering that Jesus’ life began in a manger where donkeys feed and it was brought to its climax on a donkey, with people feeding on him.

Alexander Schmemmann, who was an influential Orthodox priest and theologian, once wrote that taking Communion is *an expression of hope*. It is a symbolic participation in the future renewal of creation. Three things happen every time we participate in the Lord’s Supper: 1) We are renewed in hope 2) We declare what our hope is and 3) We are given a foretaste of the Revelation 19 wedding supper of the Lamb. Every year on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Easter Sunday our congregation receives a benevolence offering called One

Great Hour of Sharing. There are envelopes in each pew if you would like to participate. One Great Hour of Sharing is meant to instill *hope* in the people who are the recipients of this offering, which we give as *an expression of hope*.

Sometimes churches—maybe especially American churches—like to define themselves by quoting big numbers: 10,000 members, 6,000 in children’s ministry and millions of dollars in the annual budget. We put our confidence in getting to the top of whatever business we are in, whether it is money, converts, politics, basketball...or whatever. As the disciples share the meal we call the Last Supper it is much the same. They argue over who will betray Jesus but also over who gets the best seat in the house, the top position. We get the idea that being on top was important to Jesus’ disciples.

The crowds who see Jesus coming toward Jerusalem and start waving palm branches are no different. Perhaps remembering another hero, Simon Maccabeus, who launched a successful guerilla war against a brutal ruler 200 years earlier, they begin shouting: “Welcome, warrior king. We’re Number One! Hosanna!” We want a Lord who looks the part of a hero, powerful, in charge, with bodyguards, riding in a limo and getting attention from all the media outlets. The problem is that is *not* the Lord we have. This Lord comes to town on a donkey, not in a Cadillac Escalade. His is the road of vulnerability, of giving himself away for the good of others, of not looking for compliments or perks, or even recognition.

This Lord lives his whole life out of a simple conviction that even a small child can understand: Every human being, every man, woman, and child, is a beloved creation of God. This is true humility. It is the opposite of greed where we jostle at the table for the seat closest to the boss no matter who we step on or crowd out. We say, if I take care of myself first then good things will trickle down to others. But very little actually trickles down to anyone.

Peter, a disciple and intimate friend of Jesus, denied Jesus on the night he was betrayed, witnessed the resurrection, preached the gospel at Pentecost, became a leader of the early church, was imprisoned for Christ, and was ultimately

martyred for his faith. During a time of great persecution, Peter wrote: *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”* (1:3). Jesus died so that we might have life. He offers that life to every human being, not just church members, or just Americans, or just good people, but every single person on earth because each one is a beloved creation of God to be treasured, respected, and served. So, when the disciples start pushing and shoving to get to the top of the heap, Jesus says, “Hey fellas. That’s the way the world does it, a world of power-hungry, oppressive, autocratic kings and rulers lording it over them, adding insult to injury by calling themselves, of all things, Benefactors.”

“But that’s not my way,” says Jesus. You want to know the best place at the table? It’s not even at the table. It’s serving the ones Jesus is inviting to the table. A college friend waited tables one summer vacation at the biggest, fanciest restaurant in her hometown. Her legs ached. Customers were rude. The pay was terrible. She slid a tray of lemon meringue pies onto a rack too close to the tray above it and all the meringue on the pies came off on the top rack and the manager screamed at her. I said, in a not very sympathetic tone, “Such a waste of good meringue!” She learned there’s not much glory in waiting tables.

But, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, *“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”* (Philippians 2:5-8). Like a server of tables. It may sound like meekness is weakness, but the humility of Christ is anything but that. *It’s an expression of hope.* Did you hear me? *It’s an expression of hope.* That is, holy fearless God-honoring HOPE that dissolves evil and heals a broken world. A humble man riding a donkey into town from the east on a collision course with an arrogant Roman ruler parading

in from the west. That gentle King and the palm wavers walked in direct opposition to a world that oppresses and uses and exploits people.

But Christ's humility, even his last meal, leads to HOPE. It is not about putting ourselves down, but about holding Jesus up. Through the ages servants of our Lord have lived out this humility that leads to HOPE. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born to wealth and privilege in Germany and he went to prison for opposing the Nazi regime. While awaiting his execution, he counseled and prayed with fellow captors and guards when Allied bombing raids shook the walls. *He gave them hope.* Mary Kay Meyer washed and folded clothes and provided shelter and food for those with no voice, no standing and no homes at Shalom House Transitional Housing for men in Kansas City. *She gave them hope.*

And there are so many of you, people of faith and faithfulness, of gentle spirit, caring for young children or aging parents, going to school, doing your jobs as honestly and responsibly as you can, telling the simple truth day in and day out whether it works to your advantage or not, caring for your neighbors, reaching out to strangers, giving, forgiving, encouraging, because that is what Jesus taught us and because the HOPE that we have in him transforms the world.

In a few moments as you come forward to receive anointing with oil as part of the Reaffirmation of our Baptismal Vows, look at the sanctuary doors before you return to your seat. Think of someone you sincerely *hope* will come to faith one day and will follow Jesus. In Christian *hope*, pray for that individual as you walk back to your seat.

Communion is always an expression of HOPE, a participation in the future supper of the Lamb. The Reaffirmation of our Baptismal Vows today also serves as an expression of HOPE, and a symbolic participation in the future renewal of all creation when Jesus returns. Put your HOPE in King Jesus. Commit your ways to him. Stay the course. We are a people of true, unfading HOPE. Let us join in prayer: *Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me so love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope...Amen.*