

*Who is This?  
This is Jesus.*

from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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April 9, 2017  
Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-11

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” <sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees

and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” <sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Here, toward the end of the gospel, it is ironic that we have this question looming over this familiar passage of scripture. *Who is this?* Early on, there were two disciples, and then there were twelve, and now, we are told, there is a very large crowd spreading their cloaks and waving their branches. They are enacting their formative passages of scripture from the great prophet Isaiah: *Look your king is coming, humble and mounted on a donkey...* and they are quoting Zechariah, *Hosanna to the Son of David.* They are in Jerusalem for Passover, singing the Passover Hymn: *O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* And here comes Jesus riding into town, just as the ancient scriptures promised, the fulfillment of their hope and expectation - the arrival of God’s Messiah, and yet this question hovers over the city, *Who is this?* It is as if they have been given the complete script in their Playbill, the starring actor’s full biography, the summary of the plot, and yet they still do not know how it ends. *Who is this?*

This happens to us too. We look at a friend or a spouse or a parent, someone we feel we have known forever, and yet sometimes we find ourselves asking, “Who are you, and what have you done with your old self?” This question is probably easiest to recognize in our children. About a month ago, I had a conversation with the mother of a Second Grader. The child had learned a lot of new things in school back in February during Black History Month – and started coming home - with real life stories about Martin Luther King, Jr, and she had a vocabulary that swelled with words like racism and civil rights and assassination. The mother and I pondered how watching a child grow up is both

exhilarating and terrifying. Suddenly the innocence of the Kindergartner was gone – in two short years, “Who is she now?”

A year ago we saw this in our own younger son. We flew to Scotland at the end of his semester abroad, and that child who - once had us wondering if he'd ever do all his homework, much less get to an airplane on time – had matured into an adult who could navigate international travel, a subway system in any country, and who was filled with knowledge of history and art and political science, some of which we had forgotten. *Who is this?* This young adult who can make his way in the world by himself, in whose company we now delight, and where is that surly adolescence we lived through, and often worried over.

We all know what it is like to recognize someone and to not recognize fully, the very same person. Life changes us; exposure makes us grow, circumstances cause us to take on new attributes. And so it is with Jesus, riding into the Holy City on the fulfillment of ancient God-given promises, the one who had spoken like God, who had healed like God, and who tangled with the leaders of people just like God had since the beginning. There is a parade in his honor, ancient songs are sung, hopes swell, and yet... and yet... there is something here that we cannot decipher, some determination in his eye we cannot understand, some Godliness we cannot yet make sense of. *Who is this?*

I have a friend who served a church in western North Carolina, where one of the members is a carpenter. A few years ago, my friend - the pastor - and the carpenter came up with a creative idea for a visual display on the lawn of the church during the season of Lent. Near the sidewalk, leading to the main entrance from the parking area, they put a big old wooden stump out in the courtyard and created the impression of a carpenter's shop. Like a lot of art work, it was just there, with no explanation given, but with each passing week during Lent it changed slightly.

On the first Sunday of Lent there was just the big broad stump with a few carpenter's tools. The next week some lengths of wood, the following week they'd been hewn into beams. The next Sunday, people going into worship, may have noticed that some nails had been added, in a pile, beside the hammer. When the Sundays approached Holy Week, two of those beams had been affixed into a cross; the visual display moved from a more subtle association of carpentry with Jesus to a more visceral reflection on the crucifixion. On Palm Sunday some palm branches were laid beside the cross, on Maundy Thursday, a pitcher of water and towel, recalling how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.

The pastor and carpenter had a great idea for Easter; to clear all of it away, nails, hammer, wood beams, cross, towel – all of it would be gone and they would leave only a folded linen cloth on top of the stump, that at its sight everyone might hear the angel at Easter's dawn saying, *“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised. Come see the place where he lay, then go quickly and tell his disciples.”*

A linen cloth, that's all they needed for the climactic Sunday of their artistic rendering. But you never know what kind of impact such a quiet, visual creation might have on people; it proved to be very effective for one couple, in particular. For when my pastor friend arrived at the church on Saturday before Easter to clean up the wood and nails, and to put out the cloth evoking the empty tomb, this is what she found. A couple in the church had already removed the stump. They had removed everything. And in its place, they had purchased, donated and installed a wooden garden bench, adorned with an enormous peace lily and a big bow. When gently questioned about their disrupting the display before the dramatic climax on Easter morning, they said simply, *“We had to do something! Easter is a happy time!”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Kim Richter for sharing this story from Grace Covenant Presbyterian in Asheville with permission for me to use it here.

Obviously, the visual reminders of Jesus' pain and suffering had had its way with them. They could not take it after so many weeks and they intervened to make it seem at last "a happy time!" It is possible to show up for the Palm Sunday parade, and not come back to the gospel again until Easter, to move from happy time to happy time, and bypass the cross altogether. But if we do, we miss the extraordinary answer to this hovering question, *Who is this?* Who is this man who has captured the imagination of an oppressed people with posture of a liberator riding into town? Who is this – the one who proclaimed good news, who healed the sick, and gave sight to the blind? Who is this, this Jesus of Nazareth who has taken on the religious authorities and beat them at their own games of interpreting scripture for the people of God. Who is this, they shout from their perches along the route of the Palm Sunday parade.

They say at the end of our reading, that "*This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee,*" but that is a joke of an answer really, for prophets have lost their lives in Jerusalem, and Nazareth is a no-count town in the middle of nowhere, and no good has ever come from there. The real answer to the question, *Who is this?* will not be heard until the crucifixion when... "Over his head they put the charges against him, which read, "This is Jesus, King of the Jews."

The question that is raised up over the city in turmoil on an excited Palm Sunday is given answer only after those wooden beams have been hewn, and crossed, and upon them nailed his very human body with a sign that mocks him saying, "This is Jesus." You cannot get to Easter in all its unspeakable hope and joy... without going down into the pit of despair over the brutal reality of death. As my friend, Michael Lindvall, has put it, "This faith of ours stubbornly and faithfully remembers that our life's journey passes through both bright days and stormy seasons, through warm meadow days, and deep, dark valley days. The revelation

of God in the person of Jesus Christ “is deep and dark enough to encompass this totality of human experience...” even unto death.<sup>2</sup>

It was on this day in 1945, on April 9<sup>th</sup>, that German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was put to death for his work to free the German people from the death-dealing Nazi regime. And while he was confined in Hitler’s prison, he became acquainted with a God he had not fully recognized before. Bonhoeffer wrote: “God allows himself to be edged out of the world and onto the cross, and that is the way, the only way, in which God can be with us and help us.... Only a suffering God can help.”<sup>3</sup>

Only a suffering God can help when you come face to face with death through the experience of caring for the dying one you love. Only a suffering God can help when that too-young life is snatched away, leaving nothing but grief and unanswered questions. Only a suffering God can help when the camera lens pulls up close to the Syrian two-year-old struggling to breath from chemicals unleashed as weapons upon the most vulnerable of God’s children; or a truck plows down pedestrians in Stockholm, or London. Only a suffering God can be with us, and for us, in the midst of the suffering that, at one time or another, will enter into every human life. He comes among us humbly, on a donkey, down close to the people and little children, surrounded by disciples and would-be followers, people like you and me who long for a God – one who rejoices in our joys, and who shares in the worst life has to offer.

Those who cheered Jesus coming into Jerusalem, shouting Hosanna, and hailing the One who came in the name of the Lord, knew only in part, at that moment, who this Jesus was. It was not until he had been stripped, crowned with thorns, mocked, spat upon, and crucified as a common criminal that they really knew who he was God’s own Son,

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Lindvall, “Two Parades,” preached at First Presbyterian, Ann Arbor, MI, 3/24/02.

<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer quote from Barbara Lundblad, Who is This? Day1.org.

suffering on behalf of a suffering world.

Who is this? This is Jesus, the revelation of God, who does not ignore the evil or the suffering or even the death that all human beings must eventually endure. This is Jesus, the God who enters into it, where only a suffering God can help.

AMEN.