



Roanoke, Virginia

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## ***“Found in Exile: The Wrong Kind of Homecoming”***

*Luke 19:28-40; Zechariah 9:9*

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Jesus is on his way into Jerusalem for Passover. Finally, he has come to the place he’s been headed for the past three years:

Luke 19:28-40. <sup>28</sup> After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

<sup>29</sup> When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, <sup>30</sup>saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.”’ <sup>32</sup>So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ <sup>34</sup>They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ <sup>35</sup>Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. <sup>37</sup>As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, <sup>38</sup>saying,

‘Blessed is the king  
who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Peace in heaven,  
and glory in the highest heaven!’

<sup>39</sup>Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ <sup>40</sup>He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’



Zechariah 9:9

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!  
Lo, your king comes to you;  
triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

We come to Jerusalem, some 550 years after Zechariah's prophecy. The people on the road to Jerusalem that day knew what the prophets foretold. They had been waiting on a Messiah for generations.

And then, they saw Jesus. Jesus, this man who had healed the sick, fed a multitude, set captives free, made the blind see, the lame walk, and talked about God as Father. Jesus, the one the masses followed and the religious elite despised. He had set his face to Jerusalem some time ago, and now here he comes, humble and riding on a donkey just as Zechariah prophesied.

They had dreamed of a warrior king. Someone who could restore Jerusalem to the glory days generations ago before the city and temple were destroyed. They dreamed of someone like King David. They longed to be free of Rome. They yearned for their city to be a seat of real power and might, revered among the nations. They knew what they wanted. We know they won't get it.

I can remember the first time I met Mrs. Thompson. It was at freshman class orientation at Greer High School in my hometown in South Carolina. Mrs. Thompson had been my mother's high school gym coach years before, and by the time I got to Greer High, she was the vice principal. Mrs. Thompson was the kind of person you didn't cross. She carried a bullhorn with her everywhere. The hallways of our school were narrow, and crowded, but she had the eye of an eagle. She could see through the bodies and chaos of the crowded hallway and catch anyone up to no good. She'd say, "Miss Howell, this isn't Burger King, you can't have it your way!" "Mr. Anderson, this isn't Burger King, you can't have it your way!" The sound of that bullhorn clicking on struck fear into the heart of every new kid in the building—I'm sure the older students felt it, too. "Mr. Link, you can't always have it your way!" I have no idea what ever became of Mrs. Thompson, but her mantra still rings in my ears. You can't always have it your way.

The crowds on that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem knew exactly what they wanted. But they wouldn't get things their way. They wanted this itinerant preacher from Nazareth to start a riot, to start a revolt, to restore their city, their homeland to some "sought after glory". They flooded the street, they took the cloaks off their backs, they waved what they had, they made a makeshift carpet before him. They cried out, "*Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.*"

Let me tell you, it takes some real chutzpah to cry out for a king, when there are informants with bullhorns (figuratively speaking) around every corner.

On that day, that very same day, Pontius Pilate was also entering from the other side of Jerusalem in a parade of his own. He, too, was making the trek for Passover. Not a Jew himself,



Pilate traveled to keep the citizens of this Roman territory in check. After all, Passover is a Jewish festival which celebrates when God set God's people free from the empire. It was essential for Rome to keep a strong presence throughout this religious season. So, it was up to Pilate and his legions of armed soldiers and guards to remind the Jewish people who their ruler really is.

Knowing all this, it's no wonder the Pharisees were nervous. In Luke 13:31, some of the Pharisees had even warned Jesus that Herod wanted to kill him. Regardless of what they thought of the man, they had advised Jesus to lay low for his own sake and for the sake of his followers. Here again in Luke 19, some Pharisees implore Jesus to order the crowd to stop their subversive chant. Such a display of royal pretensions could bring the wrath of those in power in Jerusalem, whether it be the Sanhedrin, Herod, or Pilate himself. As it turns out, in a matter of days, Jesus will pass in judgment before all three (Luke 22:66-23:25).

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" his disciples cry out. And then they echo the multitude of angels who sang to lowly shepherds on a hillside to announce the birth of the Messiah, "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

The people knew what they wanted. The disciples knew what they wanted. If only things would play out as they'd dreamed for centuries.

Perhaps if things could go their way, Jesus could ride all the way to the palace where he would be enthroned immediately, ending their oppression under the Roman Empire and bringing suffering to an end. Or perhaps Jesus could ride all the way to the temple where he would take his rightful place as Lord and establish a heavenly kingdom on earth and every knee would bow and every tongue confess. It is the way we might rewrite the scene ourselves, if we could go back in time and amend it. But we can't always have it our way.

The crowd that day didn't get what they wanted. Their king didn't enter in majesty in grandeur. Instead, he rode awkwardly positioned on the back of a never-ridden donkey. Their king didn't head for the palace, but he rode and walked and ate among the peasants. Their king didn't march through the streets of Jerusalem inciting a revolution, he continued the difficult, uncertain, and painful path to the cross.

This is not the way the people wanted the story to go. If we're honest with ourselves, this isn't the way we want things to go. It goes against everything we know about power. It's a story we tell each year, and yet it never gets easier. All through the Gospel, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He's opened up God's word in a new way, he's healed people, he's amassed quite a following. Up until here, we're along for the ride. We're right with his disciples, caught in the fervor, excited to share the good news. And then we get to Jerusalem, and we know what comes next. We've read it or heard it or seen it before.

Fred Craddock writes, "Sooner or later somebody is going to say to you, '*Then what happened to Jesus?*' And when you tell them the truth, that he came to the city as a 33-year-old young idealist and stirred the city and the city turned on him and just like that put him on trial and executed him,



some people are going to back away. People aren't interested in a man who dies like that. It's a terrible growth strategy for the church, all that, morbid suffering and bleeding and dying."<sup>i</sup>

This king does not come with earthly power to overthrow the empire. This king comes into Jerusalem not as a conquering hero but as a servant, and the crowds who hail him today will shout "Crucify him!" by the end of the week.

This Messiah, our Messiah, was going up into Jerusalem (because that's how you enter this city on a hill), he was going up into Jerusalem in order that he might go down to die. It doesn't make sense. It's not the way we would choose. It's the wrong kind of homecoming.

It was about this time two years ago that I officiated a wedding for our former associate pastor, the Rev. Rachel Thompson-Orfield. Rachel and her husband had planned a big wedding extending the invitation to our whole congregation. But like so many hopeful couples, they didn't get things the way they wanted. Instead, Rachel and Noah eloped with a pastor, six family members, and a photographer. A State Trooper slowed down to count us and make sure our outdoor Blue Ridge Parkway wedding stayed within the 10-person cap. Rachel's grandmother and other family members joined by FaceTime, and the wedding that was supposed to be a celebration for our whole congregation took place sweetly and simply on the side of a quiet mountain.

We all have heard or experienced many stories like that. Something that was both beautiful and still a little sad at the same time.

On April 7, three days ago, a few news sources shared the photograph of Anastasia and Vyacheslav—two young Ukrainian soldiers who stood in the midst of a bombed out, temporarily quiet Kyiv to exchange their wedding vows.<sup>ii</sup> Both in combat fatigues, Anastasia wore a crown of white roses and held a bouquet as she and her groom placed rings on one another's fingers with smiles as pure and as bright as any couple here in our sanctuary on their wedding day.

An Orthodox teacher uses the phrase "glittering sadness" to describe such a scene. There is such unbearable beauty, and such pain, today.<sup>iii</sup>

I wonder where we would see ourselves in this story. Maybe you would be a disciple caught up in the fervor of this impromptu parade. Maybe you would be a Pharisee, pleading with the crowd to keep it down, lest they draw too much attention. Maybe you would be on the periphery, wanting to stay out of trouble. It's hard to say, isn't it?

For those of us on the other side of Easter, we can feel the tension of glitter and sadness on this first Palm Sunday some 2,000 years ago. Jesus had to know this dual reality, too. For some time now, he's hinted at what awaited him in Jerusalem. Did he know exactly what the next days would hold? Could he imagine?

I don't think he could have predicted each and every detail, but he had some real sense of what lie ahead. He didn't have to follow through. He could have chosen not to enter Jerusalem in such a dramatic way. He could have turned tail and run. He could have entered discreetly and not



made a scene. But no. Jesus' carefully made plans reflecting his commitment to go to the city that will reject and crucify him because of his great love for that city and, indeed, because of his great love for all the world.

William Barclay, the Scottish New Testament scholar, once commented that there are two kinds of courage in this world. There is the kind of courage that prompts someone to throw him or herself in the way of an oncoming car to push a child to safety. It is the kind of bravery that is instinctual, habitual, and is revealed in the moment of crisis. And there is also the kind of courage that sees danger coming a long way off, that has plenty of time to choose an alternative path, yet chooses to stay the course, to remain faithful, to endure the mounting fear in order to do one's duty.<sup>iv</sup>

It is this second kind of courage we see in Jesus. He knows what lies ahead of him. He has seen it coming for most of his life. He has plenty of opportunity to flee to the path of safety. Yet he does not. He stays the course, endures the fear, makes plans to embrace it in love and wrestle it to the death.

Jesus accepts today's blessings and hosannas, knowing that the crowds will turn on him, his disciples will desert him, and the only crown that awaits him is pain. Here we stand at the threshold of another Holy Week. Here we are, and here is our God. In glittering sadness, let us take up our cross and follow him.

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<sup>i</sup> Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, p. 78.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.telegraphherald.com/ap/international/image\\_aaecd96e-fd5b-5ad5-8f5a-34e4dd51d510.html](https://www.telegraphherald.com/ap/international/image_aaecd96e-fd5b-5ad5-8f5a-34e4dd51d510.html)

<sup>iii</sup> Sara Miles, "Sorrow and Love Flow Mingled Down, Palm Sunday," [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net) (Mar 28, 2010).

<sup>iv</sup> David Lose, "In the Meantime - Luke 19:28-40," [www.DavidLose.net](http://www.DavidLose.net) (Nov 22, 2013).

