

**“Up the Down Staircase”**

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Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples **2** 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.

**3** If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’”

**4** They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, **5** some of the bystanders said to them,

“What are you doing, untying the colt?” **6** They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it.

**7** Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. **8** Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. **9** Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

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

**10**

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

**11** 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.

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

- 6     who, though he was in the form of God,  
           did not regard equality with God  
           as something to be exploited,  
7     but emptied himself,  
           taking the form of a slave,  
           being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
8     he humbled himself  
           and became obedient to the point of death—  
           even death on a cross.
- 9     Therefore God also highly exalted him  
           and gave him the name  
           that is above every name,  
10    so that at the name of Jesus  
           every knee should bend,  
           in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11    and every tongue should confess  
           that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
           to the glory of God the Father.

## UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE

Cummings High School in Burlington, NC. was an old building built in the early 1900s.

It was a long, brick, two-story building with staircases at each end of a central hall.

Some long ago principal had organized the class changing chaos by decreeing that the East End staircase was UP and the West End staircase was DOWN.

This rule was strictly enforced.

Going the wrong way on a staircase was a serious offense!

One day a student found himself at the bottom of the DOWN staircase a few minutes before classes changed. His next class was in a room directly over his head.

To go upstairs according to the rule, he would need to walk all the way to the other end of the corridor, go up the UP staircase, and then walk all the way back to his class room.

This would probably have been good exercise for him. But he was a 15 year old boy.

Exercise was not on his mind.

The easiest way to do what he wanted to do was.

The student glanced at his watch, looked around and saw no teachers, and headed up the DOWN staircase.

About halfway up, he heard someone yell at him. He glanced up the second floor landing and saw the Football Coach glaring down at him.

“Get up here!” the coach yelled.

But, what happened next prevented him from complying with the coach’s orders.

The bell rang and a sea of teenagers started flowing down the DOWN staircase.

The poor guy couldn’t make any headway. He was stuck trying to go up the DOWN staircase.

Let this be a visual example of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls us to go up via the down staircase. But, that means we have to swim against the tide of popular opinion.

It’s not an easy or natural thing to do. It’s counterintuitive.

The way up is the way of the cross.  
Glory is found is not found in power and money.  
Glory is found in sacrifice and service.

## HOSANNA FOR THE WRONG REASON

When Jesus preached this, the people refused to hear the message.  
They didn't have ears to hear.

They wanted a Messiah who would bring them political and military success.  
They wanted a warrior king who would lead them to victory over the Romans.

The people shouted "Hosanna" as Jesus entered Jerusalem long ago.

But, they cheered Jesus, not because of who He was. They cheered Jesus because of who they wanted Him to be.

That's why they laid palm branches in front of him as he made his way into Jerusalem.

It hearkened back to Israel's recent history.  
Israel's military leaders, the Maccabees, defeated those who occupied their land.

And so they were able to rededicate and purify the Temple that had been defiled by pagan rituals.

As the victorious military leaders made their way to the Temple, branches were laid in front of them.

That's why they laid palm branches in front of Jesus.  
It symbolized what they wanted Jesus to be,  
a conquering hero.

They wanted him to be the one who would "throw the rascals out" and create a new, righteous kingdom on earth.

Of course, it was not only the crowds that misunderstood. Jesus' disciples wanted the same thing.

In the passage that precedes our gospel lesson, James and John came to Jesus and asked to be on his right and left in glory.

To put it in modern terms, when Jesus got to be "president", they wanted to be secretary of state and vice president.

The right and left in glory...

But, once again, they had the wrong idea about the kingdom of God.

The way to glory would not come through a military or political victory.

The way to glory would come through self sacrifice.  
The way up was the down staircase.

## THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF THE CROSS

Our Scripture for today tells us that Jesus humbled himself out of love.

He, who was in very nature God, emptied himself.  
He divested himself of power and glory,  
and became a human being.

He even humbled himself  
to the point of dying on a cross.

The Bible tells us that the cross was a stumbling block to many in the early church.

And when we read church history, we learn that in every age people tried to redefine the message of Jesus. They always tried to minimize or eliminate the cross.

The people tried to make Jesus say what they wanted to hear instead of listening to what he really said.

Our age is no different.

The cross is still a stumbling block.

We still think that the only way to be successful is to impose our will on others through the use of wealth or military might.

And there will always be preachers who will gladly give us the message we want to hear  
...instead of the message we need to hear.

And that message will always be more popular.

You get more “hosannas” when you preach about this fictional Jesus.

But, this is not the Jesus that brings us salvation.

The real Jesus gives a new definition of success.

Glory comes through sacrifice and service.  
We fill ourselves up by emptying ourselves out.

## THE LOVE OF A SERVANT

This is where my up the down staircase illustration breaks down.

Jesus calls us to go up the down staircase.

But he is not yelling at us like a football coach.  
Instead, he leads by example.

The Bible tells us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

The Son of God gave up heaven and even his own life ...in order to bring salvation to the world.

God's divine love revealed in Jesus is the love of a servant. He gave up everything, in order to bring salvation down to our level.

This is why it is important for us to say that Jesus was fully human as well as being fully divine.

It's not just about getting our theology right.  
It's about getting our life right.

The humanity of Christ is a statement about the nature of God's kingdom.

And that humanity informs what it means to be a part of that kingdom today.

The kingdom of God is human.  
The kingdom of God is down to earth.  
The kingdom of God is touchable.

We first touched that kingdom in Jesus, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And that kingdom comes today when disciples of Christ, empowered by the Spirit touch others in His name.

## THE DONKEY

In our gospel lesson, Christ doesn't come into Jerusalem riding on a war horse.

He comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a colt that has never been ridden.

Mark usually is very brief and to the point when he tells the story of Jesus. But, in today's lesson, you may have noticed that Mark gives us an unusual amount of detail when it comes to the procurement of the donkey.

Two disciples are charged to go to the next village.  
There they will find a donkey that has never been ridden.

Next they are to untie the donkey and bring back to Jesus.

But, what if someone protests?

I'm not sure what the punishment for donkey rustling was in those days but I'm sure the disciples didn't want to be charged with that.

Jesus said, "I've got you covered...  
Just tell them, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'"

Well, it played out just as Jesus said.  
Someone asked the disciples why they were taking the donkey.

The disciples said,  
"The Lord needs it. We'll bring it back soon."

And amazingly, that worked.  
I don't know about you, but if somebody started untying my donkey and said,

"Don't worry. The Lord needs it.  
We'll bring it back without a scratch."

I don't think I'd buy that.  
But, they did.

Why?

I think Jesus had arranged this unusual mode of transportation ahead of time.  
Jesus is making a statement about who he is and what the kingdom of God is all about.

And the usually brief and to the point gospel writer, Mark tells the story in great detail

....because the donkey is an important symbol.

The fact that the donkey had never been ridden suggested that it was meant for a special, sacramental purpose. And most of those who witnessed the ride into Jerusalem would have recognized the purpose.

It was a fulfillment of Scripture.  
The prophet Zachariah (9:9) wrote,

“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.”

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, he was indeed claiming to be king.

But, his mode of transportation indicated that his kingdom would be very different from any that had come before or would come after.

Unlike other kings, he would not be filled with pride.  
He would be humble.

That was the meaning of the donkey for Jesus.  
He was deliberately choosing to lower himself  
...in order that others might be lifted up.

## THE WAY OF HUMILITY

And that is the meaning of the donkey for us.

Paul told the Philippians,  
“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.”

We too are called to ride into town on a donkey.  
(Not literally, of course.  
Most of us wouldn't make it out of the barn!)

But symbolically speaking we all need to be donkey riders. Our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Our approach to others should be informed by that humble ride into Jerusalem.

We don't seek salvation  
...by throwing others “under the bus”.  
We seek salvation

...through forgiveness and humble service.

We don't seek salvation  
...by trying to live the good life.  
We seek salvation  
...by sacrificing for the good of others.

This way of life does not come naturally or easily.

Like the crowd who shouted "Hosanna" so long ago, we too cheer for Jesus.

But often our cheers are for a Messiah of our own making, a safe Jesus who is far removed from the pain and suffering of this world.

We want a Jesus who will make life more profitable and comfortable.  
We think that our association with Jesus will make us more respectable.

Sometimes we even honor Jesus so the victory will be ours.

Think of the batter who crosses himself before stepping to the plate  
...or the wide receiver who points heavenward after scoring a touchdown.

Doesn't work that way.

These are unworthy reasons to shout Hosanna.  
Our attitude and our way of life should be influenced by the life of our Savior.

In the gospel of John Jesus says,  
"I am the way, the truth and the life.  
No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

Eugene Peterson points out that this verse is not so much about right theology as it is about right actions. He wrote,

"Christ is the way as well as the truth and the life.

When we don't do it his way, we mess up the truth and we miss out on the life.

We can't live a life more like Jesus by embracing a life less like Jesus."

Paul wrote in the verses that precede our epistle lesson for today,

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,  
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  
Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

This is a very practical summary of what it means to follow Jesus.

And when we live this way, we learn what it means to go up the down staircase.

We experience the power of God by riding the humble donkey into town.

The way of humility is the way of Christ.

And ultimately that will mean the way of the cross, the way of self sacrifice.

## CHIEF CORNERSTONE

When the people cheered for Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, they quoted Scripture, Psalm 118. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

But, there's another section in that same Psalm that would have helped them understand the ride into Jerusalem better.

The Psalmist also wrote that the one who comes in the name of the Lord was the stone that the builders rejected.

You can't go up the down staircase without running into a bunch of people.

And you can't follow Jesus unless you take up a cross. If the world rejected Jesus, the world will reject those who follow the way of Jesus.

But, we know that rejection is not the end of the story. The stone that the builders rejected has (as the Psalmist put it) become the "chief cornerstone". (Psalm 118:22)

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem he challenged the religious and political leaders of his day.

And they crucified him for it.

But, even a crucifixion was no match for the power of God's grace.  
The symbol of salvation and the cornerstone of our faith is the cross.

Today's lesson teaches us that we see the divinity of Jesus most clearly on the cross.

The cross is the "throne" from which King Jesus rules.

There is great mystery in a God who suffers.  
But this is the God revealed in the life of Jesus.

Divinity is revealed in humble service.  
Divinity is revealed in self-giving love.  
Divinity is revealed on the cross.

Ironically, when all seems lost,  
when the Son of God is being killed,  
the power of God's grace changes everything.

"Father forgive them," Jesus cries from the cross.  
And God does just that.

And those things that Jesus did not seek directly, power and glory, ....they come to him.

God gives Him the name that is above every name.

The One the world rejected became the cornerstone. The One who was dead is now alive.

We'll talk about that more next week.

But, for now let us go up by way of the down staircase.

This Holy Week let us once again walk with Jesus on the way to the cross.

Amen.