

# **At First ...**

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*Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him (John 12:15-16).*

Today, of course, is the beginning of Holy Week. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday, though nobody calls it that at the time. He teaches in the Temple for a few days, only to be arrested on Thursday night, after what turns out to be his last supper. The next day, Jesus is crucified, and the week winds down with the long, still sadness of Saturday. Only after all these things do we come to the "great gettin' up day" of Easter – which is why, if anybody shows up only on Easter and starts the story there, he's missing much of the point.

All sorts of things have led to the great events of Holy Week. Nobody would line up along the road with palm branches unless they'd seen or heard about the things Jesus already said and did. Just a couple miles outside the city, in the little village of Bethany on the other side of the Mount of Olives, they say Jesus raised up a man called Lazarus, after Lazarus lay dead in a tomb for several days.

Ironies abound in the gospel, and one irony here is that, by bringing Lazarus back to life, Jesus prompts a conspiracy that will bring about his own death. Some religious leaders are afraid the people will get all riled up from following Jesus, and then the Romans will come down hard on them, and possibly destroy the Temple, or even the nation itself. All of this leads Caiaphas, the high priest, to tell

the council, “You don’t know anything! You don’t understand that it’s better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

And there’s another irony. Caiaphas turns out to be right, or at least half right, but not in the way he thinks. One man will indeed die for the people – not to ward off the Romans, but to fulfill the purpose of God. The truth is that even the darkest deeds of human beings can be redeemed in the providence of God. Jesus will die, but he will rise again, just as he raised up Lazarus. And this time, it will be the Son of God who rises, and in his resurrection the sins of the world will be taken away – even the sins of those who tried to get rid of him.

Now some of the Pharisees plot to trap Jesus when he comes to Jerusalem. They think they’ll squash the movement that’s gathering around him, but in fact they will set in motion the very events that multiply the movement and send it out across the whole world. As the Bible tells us again and again, the powers that be are never as powerful as they pretend to be, and the cleverest among them can’t hold a candle to the wisdom of God.

Look around at the crowd on this Palm Sunday, and ask yourself what you see. Some sick people are here, hoping for the healing they’ve heard can come from the very touch of Jesus, and they line up to see whether he might touch them too. Some have already been healed, so they’ve come mainly to thank Jesus, and to cheer him on. Others are so tired of the hypocrisy of priests and politicians that they flock to hear a man who will simply tell them the truth about the way things are.

A few zealots are hoping that Jesus will start a movement to drive out the Romans, a movement they could commandeer later on. Others, like Caiaphas, are afraid of exactly that. They want to nip any insurrection in the bud, because they know that the zealots underestimate the power of Rome. And then there's Rome itself, the agents of Pilate who watch from the balconies and wander among the crowd, jotting down the names of anyone who looks suspicious.

John says that Jesus' disciples don't understand any of this at first. And that's the way it is, isn't it? We rarely understand anything fully when we're caught up in the midst of it. We go about our lives, just taking care of business, tending to whatever is in front of us. We pursue some things and avoid others, and the ultimate meaning of it all gets lost in the mundane details.

The life of faith is like that too. We don't really understand it very well at first. Many of us came to church in the beginning because somebody brought us. Maybe our parents brought us to be baptized, and if they came more often, they brought us along to sit quietly and color in the children's bulletin while the grownups sang and prayed and listened to the sermon. We went to Sunday school and heard Bible stories, and we were told that God loves us. But we couldn't really see God, so who exactly God is and how we should relate to God were things we had to figure out for ourselves, if we were ever inclined to do that as children.

Meanwhile, there were more tangible, concrete things right in front of us: toys and games to play, and people to become our friends. Later on, there was school and work and sports and family, and all the other things that dominate our lives. The busier we got with concrete things, the easier it was to let spiritual things get pushed aside. And even the

spiritual part of our lives tended to be tied to the tangible things we cared most about.

At first, when we think about God, we tend to focus on what we hope God will do for us. “O God, please help me pass algebra.” “Please don’t let me get in trouble for that thing I did yesterday.” Then some of our prayers start to look beyond ourselves, but we still ask God for help with things we can’t control. “God, please help our neighbor get over her long illness.” “Please be with those who suffered that terrible tragedy.”

A group here at Westminster recently read a book on prayer by Anne Lamott called *Help, Thanks, Wow*. Those are our most basic prayers, aren’t they? I visited a church in Vienna, Austria, years ago where people had their prayers engraved on tiles in a chapel. The great majority of them said simply “Hilfe und Danke,” “Help and Thanks.”

Even the promise of heaven, which Easter lifts up for believers, starts out as something we hope God will give us, and we want to know what we need to do to get in.

I’m always struck in Bible studies, when we come across the question of deathbed conversions, how many people are troubled by that idea – or by the thief on the cross next to Jesus who repents on Good Friday, and Jesus tells him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Some people seem to suspect that God is too soft on crime. They want to see more punishment for those they think have it coming. But there’s also the opposite objection to last-minute conversions – as if to say, why have I been trying so hard to be good all this time, if I could just wait till the last minute and confess my sins, and get into heaven anyway?

Some people are still stuck with a version of the question that first came up around the dinner table in childhood: How many peas do I have to eat in order to get dessert? Or more generally, how much do I have to do to get what I really want?

As it turns out, this is not even a uniquely human question. Dan Ariely is a psychologist and behavioral economist at Duke University, and he has an advice column that appears in the *Wall Street Journal*, a sort of highbrow Dear Abby. Last weekend he responded to a father who asked whether he should pay his teenagers as a reward to encourage better behavior, such as being polite, or cleaning up after themselves, or leaving the house on time.

Ariely says we ought to be careful about the unintended consequences of material rewards. He tells the story of a dolphin named Kelly, who lived in a marine institution in Mississippi. Her trainers wanted to teach Kelly to keep her pool clean, so they gave her a fish every time she brought them a piece of litter from the pool. Now dolphins are very smart, and Kelly quickly figured out that, instead of bringing a whole sheet of paper back to her trainers, she could just hide it under a rock, and tear off one piece at a time. That way, she could keep coming back for multiple rewards from the same sheet of paper. Ariely's summary was, "I think it's best to teach your children how to act, now how to maximize their pay."

Humans are not alone, it seems, in trying to figure out how much, or how little, we need to do to in order to get what we really want. That's the way it is for all of us at first, but over time some of us learn that it's better to do the right thing just because it's the right thing to do. After a while, we

don't need the other rewards so much because virtue, as the philosophers say, can be its own reward.

At first, even Jesus' disciples seem to be in it for the reward. The mother of James and John, for example, asks Jesus if he'll let her boys sit on either side of him when he comes into his kingdom. Even following Jesus, or becoming a Christian, might appear to be all about the rewards in the beginning, here in this life and in the life to come.

But then a funny thing happens. After a while, the Spirit of Jesus begins to rub off on us. We may come to Jesus at first because we want something else: a passing grade, an escape from trouble, a healing of some sickness. In the beginning, Jesus is mostly a means to some other end. But after a while, if we follow Jesus closely, and listen to what he says, and watch how he lives, the Spirit of Christ starts to shape our own spirit. The more that happens, the more Jesus stops being a means to some other end, and starts to become the end himself.

The longer we walk with Jesus, the more we understand God too. At first, we come to God because we want something else, and we want to know how to stay on God's good side, because we want the rewards God has to give. But the more we follow Jesus, the more we see that God is not like us in that way.

God doesn't do as little as possible for us. Instead, God gives us life and places us in a world filled with beauty and all sorts of pleasures and opportunities to enjoy. God gives us vastly more than we deserve. And even when we foul things up and take God's gifts for granted, God will go to any length to seek and save the lost. God will leave 99 sheep in the fold to come looking for us, if we're the one that



wandered away. God will come running down the road to meet us when we've prodigally gone astray; and God will remind us that we are loved, too, when we become those dutiful but cranky ones who grouse about others who are not as righteous as ourselves.

We learn from Jesus that God will do whatever it takes to care for us, even before we know what God is doing. It's like the way parents love their babies long before the children have any idea what love is – except that love was God's idea in the first place, and we only learn to love because God wants us to know the joy of loving.

Love, of course, is about looking beyond our own desires, and learning to care for others. Paul tells us not just to look after our own interests, but to put the interests of others first, because that's what love does. "Have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus," Paul says – the mind that reaches out from the heart of God to care for other people and for all of creation.

At first we don't understand all that, any more than Jesus' disciples understood what was happening around them. But after a while, it begins to come clearer. After a while, the scales fall from our eyes and we see the goodness of God at work all around us – bringing every good thing in this world, and redeeming all that is bad. When that happens, we stop asking how many peas we have to eat in order to get desert.

At first, we might measure success in life by how much we can get from our modest investment of effort. But after a while, we stop asking how much we *have to* do, and start asking what more we *can* do. After a while, duty melds with delight, and obligation melts into joy. Then we start to

understand what Jesus means when he says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” And when that happens, we believe what he says, because we know from our own experience that it’s true.