



Poland Presbyterian Church

*At the Green since 1802*

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### **"The Dominant Chord of Passion"**

#### **Mark 11: 1-11**

*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately." ' <sup>4</sup>They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna!*

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

*<sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

*<sup>11</sup>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.*

A number of years ago the late essayist and screen writer Nora Ephron wrote about a disconcerting experience attending a movie theatre. A number of things went wrong, concluding with the film breaking twenty minutes before the conclusion, leaving the audience wondering what would happen. It rendered the movie meaningless and the viewers left with an empty feeling, knowing that the story was not complete. In many ways, Ephron's experience at the movie theatre is not unlike the experience of worshippers today and in the coming week which we know as Holy Week.

A former parishioner made a comment about the worship services that characterize Holy Week. She said: "They don't end right. They need something more." She was right and I praised her sharp perception. The worship of this week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, even today, (Palm Sunday), has an incomplete feel to it. It is like leaving the theater without seeing the last 20 minutes of the movie. We anticipate something more. We feel the story is incomplete.

I suspect my title is curious: "The Dominant Chord of Passion." Dominant chords are the most complex chords in music. They often sound dissonant to our ears. They seem to anticipate something. They create instability and raise tension in the ear of the listener. Like an incomplete movie, they need to be resolved. That is what makes music interesting to our ears.

Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday have this same unresolved tension. The scriptures, indeed the services themselves, end abruptly and in strange and puzzling ways. (Today, the Gospel of Mark ends the story of Jesus entry into Jerusalem in a curious way. Jesus brought the parade to end, because it was past his bed time. "It was already late.") Worshipers often leave Holy Week services feeling the tension of Christ's week of passion. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday don't even end with a benediction! It is tension that is looking for resolution.

Today, in the next few moments, I want to share with you why this week is so important to our life today. **First**, Holy Week parallels human experience. **Second**, there is a different way to understand Palm Sunday. It is not merely a triumphant parade, it is a prelude to passion. **Last**, we can interpret our experience in terms of the passion of Holy week.

## I

**Our lives are filled with unresolved tension.** The psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim wrote a great deal about children's stories and their function in the development of a child. The bed-time stories we tell our children often describe conflicts and difficulties, but they resolve to a happy ending. This resolution puts the child at peace and enables her to fall asleep. Oh that life was like children's stories! Every day would have a happy ending! The good would prosper. The evil in the world would be vanquished. People wouldn't get sick. Accidents would not happen. Life would be fair and it would be just. But we are not strangers to reality.

The writer of Ecclesiastes captured this when he wrote in his 9<sup>th</sup> chapter:

*"The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful...."* (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

This is the reality we encounter daily. Life is filled with loose ends and things that don't make sense. It needs something more. Something is missing. Our lives anticipate a happy resolution.

But most of us know this. *"Preacher... you aren't saying anything new. This is why we come to church. We are looking to have the loose ends tied up and things put back together."* "Fix it!"

## II

**Jesus entered Jerusalem and he enters our lives with a flourish.** We have heard the TV preacher say, "When Jesus comes into your life... Everything will be better." It is a great promise and it appeals to a lot of people. Yet I cannot tell you how many times I have heard people say, "I am a faithful Christian. Jesus entered my life. But things aren't better." The reality is Christians have bad days. Good Christians become ill. They lose their jobs. The storms of life fall upon us also. When Christ comes into our lives, shouldn't they get better? Shouldn't the illness go away? Shouldn't we find a better job? Shouldn't my marriage improve? The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem might help us understand what happens when Jesus is welcomed into our lives.

Jesus was welcomed with open arms, with shouts of joy, with palm branches and cloaks spread on the road. Hosanna! In some ways it was a great day because at last, the crowd believed, things would be made right. But consider the events that followed. Mark tells us that he left the city because it was late. Matthew and Luke relate that he went to the Temple and tore things up. He created more tension! (Luke 19:45, Matthew 11:12)

The events following this entry into Jerusalem are filled with conflict and eventually death. What events should we expect when Jesus enters our lives?

*"Wait a minute, wasn't this supposed to be the Messiah? He seems to stir things up more than he fixes them."*

Our experience of Jesus is often similar. We welcome him with open arms. We cry out, "at last our messiah, our savior is here." "Hosanna!" It is a great day. And then we go to sleep, wake up realizing that our story is still filled with the tensions and instability of life. At work the boss is still the same. At school we still have trouble with geometry. Nothing seems to change. That is the biggest argument against Christianity.... What has changed? Sometimes life becomes more complex, more unstable, because not only do we experience the demands of the world... we now have the demands of discipleship.

### III

One of the best books on discipleship is *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In that amazing volume, written in a Nazi prison, awaiting execution, he wrote these words. Christian faith involves "throwing ourselves completely in the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane." In other words, "it is not about me!" It is about Christ and his passion. This is the core of the Christian life!

Too often we want the happy ending without tension, without difficulty, without trials. But think about it. Happy endings by themselves would make a terribly boring novel or movie. Because it isn't real! What this week should tell us is that suffering, confrontation, conflict and tension are part of life. Easter is the event that resolves the tension and redeems the suffering of life. It is that final resolution that we anticipate.

My fantasy: Can you imagine what would happen if we denied people entrance to Easter worship unless they had attended the Good Friday service? It would be a small handful indeed. But the point is that our society wants Easter without the Good Friday. We want the resurrection without the cross.

Someone once told me that Good Friday is a "real downer". It is. But its morbidity only accentuates the life and power of Easter. Art and music are so helpful in understanding this. Colors are always brighter against a dark background. The music of Mozart dances, but it dances over dark chords: the dark and dominant chords of passion.

This is the good news. There is an Easter. God does not leave us in the limbo of life. All the confusion and pain of life will resolve finally, and in Easter we receive a glimpse of that resolution. In the Lord's Supper we have a "foretaste of that victory."

In a week, on Easter Sunday, we celebrate the victory of the empty tomb, but that victory was won on the cross.

This is the week of the cross. It is the week when we walk with Christ through the "valley of the shadow."

This is the week when we throw ourselves completely in the arms of God, taking seriously the suffering of God in the world—watching with Christ in Gethsemane.

This is the week that resolves into the victory of Easter!

Let us walk with Jesus this week and experience his passion, so that the light and power of the resurrection will become more tangible and powerful in our lives. This is the good news. Amen.