

## **PALM (PASSION) SUNDAY | MARCH 28, 2021**

MARK 11:1-11 | MARK 14:66-72

As we've been reading Mark's gospel this year, you've probably noticed two very basic facts. People want to be near Jesus. And people claim to know Jesus. Let's start with the first. Think for a minute about the crowds. Before you finish the first chapter of his gospel, Mark tells us that there were so many people that wanted to be near Jesus, that he couldn't move around. He couldn't go where he needed to go. The well-trod story of the paralytic man lowered through the roof by his friends illustrates the point. Why is he lowered through the roof? Because there are too many people to get in through the door.

And not only do people want to be near Jesus, but people claim to know Jesus, to understand why he's here and how his life will unfold. When Jesus asks who people say that he is, people have all kinds of ideas. They've thought about it. They believe they know how he's supposed to act and what he's going to do next. And when Peter triumphantly confesses that Jesus is the messiah, it's not a coincidence that he adds his own agenda for how Jesus should spend the rest of his ministry. People want to be near. And people claim to know.

Nowhere is people's desire to be near and claim to know more evident than on Palm Sunday. And here, Jesus, who usually tries to avoid crowds and obscure his true identity, seems to let his guard down and open up. Jesus has avoided crowds so far, but now, entering into Jerusalem, he seems to welcome the adulation. He even plays into it a little knowingly. And the crowd's shouting "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," which would have drawn a rebuke earlier in the gospel, now goes unchallenged. After all the caginess and secrecy of the early ministry, when Jesus enters into Jerusalem he seems to say, "Now you can be near. And now you can know."

Which is part of what makes Mark's passion narrative so dramatic. Because when Jesus welcomes the crowds, the crowds begin to disappear. Jesus enters the city with multitudes but then, one by one, people start to disappear. They abandon him. And people who once claimed to know everything about Jesus now claim not to know about him at all.

Nowhere is this reversal clearer than in Peter's denial. Up to this point, Peter has claimed a pre-eminent place among the disciples. He seems to be standing next to Jesus at every major event in the gospel. When Jesus reveals his identity at the Transfiguration, Peter is there. When Jesus invites three disciples to see a girl returned to life, Peter is there. When Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple, Peter is there. And Peter seems self-assured in his understanding of who Jesus is and what his life means. And he even claims that this will never change. That he will always be a faithful disciple.

Until Jesus's arrest. While Jesus is off under trial, Peter is not there. He follows at a distance and then sits by a fire in a courtyard. And when people ask if he is a disciple of Jesus, Peter not only denies being a disciple but says that he doesn't even know who this Jesus person is. People want to be near Jesus. And people claim to know Jesus. Until they don't.

St. Mark is telling us a story about Peter, but he's also telling us something about ourselves. About the stories we tell ourselves and the way that we view our lives. That's part of what makes Peter's denial so tragic. All this time Peter has claimed to have some intimate knowledge of Jesus. But it's all his own projection. And not only does Peter not understand Jesus. He doesn't even understand himself.

There's a show on PBS called "Finding Your Roots" that you may have seen. And the premise of the show is that a team of researchers does a bunch of ancestry research on some celebrity. And then the celebrity sits down with Dr. Henry Louis Gates and this big book, and they talk about what they learned about their ancestors. And if you've ever seen the show, you know it

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usually breaks in one of two ways. Sometimes people discover something inspiring and profound about their family, something that makes them feel whole and proud and reinforces their sense of identity. But sometimes the show breaks the other way. Sometimes they go through the family tree and discover that their ancestors turned out to be pretty awful. Maybe they put Japanese people in internment camps or deported Cherokees or something like that.

And it's interesting to see how people react. Sometimes they seem embarrassed. Sometimes it seems to confirm a suspicion they had. In at least one case someone tried to keep the show from airing. But the most common response, the one we tend to take on as well in less dramatic ways, is to suggest that if I had been alive back then, I would have done something different. I would have been more courageous. I would have taken a stand. I would have been a more responsible person.

But whenever we start telling ourselves stories about how we would have acted, St. Mark slows us down and asks, "Are you sure?" We would like to think that we know ourselves. That we know what we would do in a given situation. And the truth is that we really don't. Like Peter, we don't fully know ourselves. And sometimes we don't fully realize the full consequences of our actions until it's too late.

In fact, you notice that Peter never makes a conscious choice to deny Jesus. It seems like he doesn't realize he's denying Jesus until the cock crows. And then, St. Mark tells us, "he remembered." Peter was so sure of his own character and his ability to be a hero in the story, but it wasn't until the moment passed that he realized what happened. And so he wept. And we probably would, too.

A week from today, we're going to celebrate Easter and hear St. Mark's account of the resurrection. And there's going to be a lot going on that day, and it will be easy to miss something important. So without getting ahead of ourselves too much, I want you to notice something you'll hear. In Mark's telling, this group of women arrives at the empty tomb and are told to go ahead and proclaim the resurrection. But they aren't just told to tell it to anyone within earshot. And they aren't just told to tell it to the disciples. They're told to tell it to "Peter and the disciples." The Easter message is meant for Peter, in particular.

So this week asks us to hold two things together at the same time. The first is that, like Peter, we are prone to overestimating our abilities. That oftentimes the self-knowledge we have is based more on who we want to be rather than who we actually are. That we wait for the big moment when we can make a difference, and then the cock crows twice and we realize the moment has passed.

The second is that the stories we tell ourselves don't set the boundaries of what God is able to do. God isn't constrained by the narratives we tell ourselves and the limits we place on our own lives. Peter may have abandoned Jesus, but Jesus hasn't abandoned Peter. And when that message comes, "Go and tell Peter and the disciples that he is raised," it's not going too far to imagine your name in there, too.

We deny. We follow at a distance. We make ourselves the heroes of our own stories. And so we weep. But joy comes in the morning for Peter and for us. That even in our ignorance, our denials, and our mythmaking, God still wants to be near and know the depths of our hearts.

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