



Passion/Palm Sunday March 16, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 21:1-11

“The exalted humble One rides today”

Today is Palm Sunday, friends. We have sung a traditional Palm Sunday hymn. We have welcomed the children waving their palm branches. We think about Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. We know this Sunday precedes the greatest Sunday of the church year: EASTER SUNDAY, the great day of Resurrection.

But this Sunday is also Passion Sunday. Today we also remember what happened after the excited, joyful people scattered, in fear of the authorities. How do we allow these stories to illuminate our lives? How can we hear them in a new, fresh way?

Let's use our imaginations. Let's pretend that we live in ancient times in the Middle East. Imagine that we have just met, possibly as travelers stopping to rest by a roadside. I am no longer your pastor, but a woman in the crowd, who has begun to speak. People gradually quiet down in order to listen.

My friends, have you heard any of the stories? The stories that have been passing from mouth to ear throughout all Israel in recent days? Stories of the unusual rabbi, who was known as a teacher, healer and worker of wonders? The stories they tell- well—they are of all kinds. Some say there has never been another like him. Others say he was no one special. In fact, there are those who'd say he was an evil man. Yes, so many stories, what is true?

I can only tell you what I know myself, from what I have seen and understand. Now, I am no one special, only a widow who's been given a home with my eldest son and his family.

I first heard of the teaching and healing rabbi from his activities in Galilee. There are often rumors of marvelous healers that rise up and stir excitement from time to time. But soon the talk dies down, and excitement ebbs away. But this rabbi, he seemed to continue to gather crowds. I joined some of those crowds, and listened to his teaching.

My wonder was increased after a friend of mine, a woman I've known since childhood, was healed by this teacher. I won't say too much about that--- it's a delicate matter, but I will tell you that her illness made her "unclean". So, for the twelve years she suffered, she not only felt the physical pain of illness, but also the anguish of being an outcast.

She was very bold with the rabbi. Can you imagine—although she was forbidden to make contact with any person whatsoever, she actually crept up behind him and touched the hem of his robe! She TOUCHED him. And she was healed. When he realized who it was had touched him, he wasn't angry. Instead, he praised her! He said her faith had made her well.

After that, I really changed. I was sure this rabbi was something special. As stories of his teaching and miracles spread, people began to wonder if he might be the Messiah promised to us. At first I thought, "No, that can't be possible," but then I began to wonder.

He often talked of a new kingdom, a kingdom of God. He said he had come to bring that kingdom, and he described again and again what that kingdom would be like. It would be so different from the rule of the Romans. There would be mercy and justice—for ALL, even outcasts.

The rabbi had a close band of followers. They seemed to be more and more certain that the rabbi would lead us into a new age of Jewish rule, throwing out the Romans with God's help. Many of us hardly dared to hope, but more and more of us began to believe it might be possible.

As is customary for my family, my son and his household, we traveled to Jerusalem this year, to celebrate the Passover. We rented rooms and began preparing for the feast.

Then we heard that the rabbi was coming to Jerusalem. His followers came looking for a donkey he might ride into the city. The word passed like wildfire through Jerusalem..... a donkey.....

Do you understand? It was foretold the Messiah would come, riding on a donkey. We were amazed and ecstatic. This could be it!! The time when God would lead his Anointed One to throw out the Romans!

People poured out of their homes, lining the road to see what would happen. We were among them, craning our necks to catch a glimpse of the Messiah. We hadn't dared breathe the word before, but now we began to shout it: "Son of David! Blessed is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest!"

I saw that people in the crowd were laying their clothes in the road, forming a carpet for our new king. And they were waving branches, spreading those in his path as well. A jolt of fear, sharp, like a blow, hit me as I saw the branches.

These were not just ANY branches, they were PALMS. Palm branches—do you know what that meant? The palm was a symbol. It was a symbol for Jewish nationalism. I was too afraid to stay there. We turned and went back to my son's home.

The rest of the story is nearly too painful to tell. But I must speak of it. Over the next days I alternated between hope and fear. I KNEW this man was special. God was with him. I believed it in my bones. Yet at the same time I felt uneasy. The Romans are so powerful, TOO powerful, I would think. This is dangerous for him. But then my heart would ask me, "But are the Romans more powerful than GOD?" I know that isn't true. I KNOW it!

But, oh my friends, my heart is breaking and my thoughts are so confused. God is more powerful than the Romans, yes, it MUST be so. But the rabbi wasn't.

He must not have been the Messiah after all. You see, they arrested him. They took him at night. He was whipped and beaten. Tortured. Sentenced to death.

I didn't want to go. Like all insurrectionists and escaped slaves, he was to be executed in the harshest manner, by crucifixion. I didn't want to go, but something drew me. I saw it. He was so hurt, so torn and bleeding. They drove in the spikes and he didn't cry out. It was awful. I don't have words to tell you. I was there early, at six o'clock. It was close to 9 o'clock when they nailed him to the cross. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't. The day dragged on so very slowly. It grew dark, stormy and strange. It was mid-afternoon before he died. I couldn't stay to watch them take his body down. I left, blinded by tears, stumbling home to my family.

How could we have been so wrong? What happened to destroy our dreams so quickly? I saw none of his closest followers; they had all disappeared except for some of the women and one or two men.

How could we all have been so wrong? I had been so sure—he was the Messiah, a new king for the oppressed and burdened. I knew it! But I was wrong.

There is something in me that struggles—that won't give up. Isn't that crazy? A voice that breathes, "No, you are RIGHT...you are right." My friends, I ask you, Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean, the Messiah, the CHRIST. Am I wrong, or right?

Now, let's move in our imaginations a number of years forward. We are part of this woman's family, reading a letter she has sent to us:

Dear ones, I greet you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am blessed to be a part of the house church in this foreign land, but I miss you all very much. Do you remember that day when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? We were so hopeful and excited, and his death crushed our hopes. We had no idea how God would turn everything upside down! God, who raised Jesus from death, is the One who lives in us now and promises us new life as well--- abundant life here in this world, and eternal life beyond.

Jesus was willing to be humble, to DIE for us. That's what lifts him high. There's a hymn we sing here that I love—the last lines go like this:

“Jesus humbled himself. He became obedient to death- even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name that is above every name. At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Jesus is the exalted humble One. That seems like a contradiction but it isn't. And he didn't ride just into Jerusalem that day long ago. He rides today, too. Today Jesus rides to the gates of our hearts. Spread this good news to all you meet: The exalted humble One rides today, to the gates of every human heart. May we open and greet him with joy!

Fast forward. Here we sit in March of 2008, more than two thousand years after the events described in the Bible. But it is still true. Jesus rides today, to the very gates of our hearts. Let him in--- and life will be new and fresh. May his Holy Spirit guide us as we follow the One on the donkey. Amen.