

A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. When his father returned from church holding a palm branch, the youngster asked, *“Why do you have that palm branch dad?”*

*“Well, you see, son,”* he replied, *“when Jesus came into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him, so we got palm branches today.”*

The little boy replied, *“Aw, shucks! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!”*

For one reason or another, it seemed like no one wanted to miss Jesus on that first Palm Sunday, as hundreds or even thousands of people crowded the narrow streets of Jerusalem at Passover time to see him. He was the man they believed to be the Messiah, or at least an earthly king who would overthrow the Romans and re-establish Israel to its former glory. Up to this point Jesus has been hiding the fact that he is the Messiah from the people, but now he'll make his identity known.

This was a really dangerous move, however, because there were some powerful people who hated Jesus and wanted him dead. Think back several years and try to imagine Condoleeza Rice riding into Baghdad on a bike and you've got the picture. His own men had argued with him about the wisdom of making the trip, but Jesus knew that his ministry wouldn't be complete and his mission wouldn't be successful unless he took his gospel message from the small town of Galilee and declared it in the great temple in Jerusalem.

As I think about Palm Sunday, there are many things we could focus on. We could talk about palm branches, or the Mount of Olives, or about Jesus driving out the money changers and cleansing the temple the next day.

But today I'd like to focus on something we don't often think about on Palm Sunday. And that is, when it comes to God's plan for Jesus entering Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday, it's all about the donkey. And whether Jesus just knew supernaturally that this donkey would be there or whether he'd prearranged with the owners, it really doesn't matter. Either way, the donkey is essential to God's plan here, so Jesus sends the disciples off to get it. He tells them, *“you will find a mother donkey together with her colt. Untie them and bring them to me.”* He even tells them what to say if someone tries to stop them. *“The Lord needs them.”*

It's almost funny to see a man many were calling King riding into town on a little donkey that probably wasn't much bigger than he was! Not even a saddle on the thing, just coats for a cushion. Now keep in mind that when a king rode into a city on a donkey, that was a symbol of gentleness and peace, unlike a conquering king would ride into the city on a war horse. So Jesus presents himself to the people as the Messiah, but a different type of Messiah than what the people were expecting. And since he's not come to make war but to make peace, he chooses the donkey.

But remember that Jesus also chose the donkey to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. And this prophecy from Zechariah (9:9) foretold that the Messiah would come to Jerusalem gentle and riding on a donkey. Isn't it remarkable that God's plan for the donkey stretched all the way back to the Old Testament book of Zechariah?

But it actually goes back even further than that. There's images of the donkey in prophecies all the way back in the book of Genesis (49:10-11).

Well, the disciples do exactly as Jesus instructed. They get the donkey and the colt, they place their cloaks on the animals, and Jesus rides the colt, the young donkey that had never been ridden before, in fulfillment of the Zechariah prophecy.

Many of those in the crowd created a royal carpet of sorts by spreading their cloaks on the road before him. This custom went back to Old Testament times where the people would spread their cloaks on the ground before the approaching king. We read about it in 2 Kings (9:13): Spreading your cloak on the ground before the king was a sign of submission to his authority, so when the people spread their cloaks on the ground before Jesus, they were welcoming him into Jerusalem as their king.

Still others cut palm branches and spread them on the road. Palm branches were a sign of military victory, and so we begin to understand what kind of king some of the people expected in Jesus. At any rate, if Palm Sunday was all about the donkey for Jesus, for many people it was all about the palms.

Well the crowd grows bigger as Jesus approaches Jerusalem, and now there are crowds of people ahead of Him as well as crowds of people following, and they are all shouting: *"Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"* Hosanna, you see, was a cry of salvation, meaning "Save us!" So the people were crying out, *"Hosanna! Save us, Son of David!"*

And while *"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"* was a common greeting to pilgrims attending the feast at Jerusalem, here the greeting took on an additional meaning for these people as they recognized Jesus as the Messiah who came in the name of the Lord.

So what can we possibly learn from the donkey, if anything? Well, God once used a donkey to speak to someone in the Old Testament, didn't He? Remember the story of Balaam, the pagan prophet, and his talking donkey that is found in the Book of Numbers (22)? So I guess God can use a donkey to speak to us today if He wants, right?

The story I'm about to share with you is not entirely my own but is based on one I recall having read some time ago. So my re-telling of the story today might be somewhat different from the original. Nonetheless, this is the story of Palm Sunday as told straight from the donkey's mouth.

Once there was a young donkey named Jacob. He lived in the village of Bethphage, right next to Bethany, just east of Jerusalem. Jacob was an enthusiastic little donkey who loved to run around the stall kicking up his legs, jumping up and down.

*"Some day,"* said Jacob, *"I will grow up big and strong and will be able to carry a man on my back!"*

*"Yes, you will son,"* his mother replied.

One day the village grew busy and crowds of people arrived in great numbers from all over the land. *“Mother,”* asked Jacob, *“where are all these people coming from?”*

*“They are going to Jerusalem for the great feast,”* explained his mother. *“Every year at this time the people come from far away places to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem. It’s a time of great rejoicing and celebration as they remember how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt so many years ago.”*

*“Can I go to Jerusalem to see?”* asked Jacob.

*“No, Jacob,”* his mother answered. *“But we can go to the village border to watch.”*

So, off they went. Jacob’s eyes were shining with excitement as he watched the people stream through the village on their way to Jerusalem. He cocked his head, lifted his ears and listened intently to the noise of chattering voices, clicking wheels and a whole chorus of animal sounds. He sniffed the air and caught the scent of the many goats and lambs being led through the village. He wondered why the people were bringing the animals into the city.

Distracted by so many new sights and sounds, Jacob wandered away from his mother and accidentally crossed the village border. One of his owners spotted him, chased him down, returned him to the village, and tied him and his mother to a post.

*“Rats,”* thought Jacob. *“I hate being tied down.”*

But suddenly two strange men approached him. *“Look, there he is!”* one of them cried out.

*“Yes,”* shouted the other man. *“It’s just as the Master said.”*

*“Are they talking about me?”* Jacob wondered. Apparently they were, for they came right up to him and started untying him and his mother. Jacob felt an excitement stirring in the air, and his curiosity grew even stronger.

Just then his owners appeared. *“Why are you untying our donkeys?”* they asked.

*“The Lord needs them. He will send them back to you shortly,”* answered the men.

*“Then you may take them”* the owners replied. So the strange men began to lead Jacob and his mother away from their home.

*“Mother, what is going on?”* asked Jacob.

*“I don’t know son,”* replied his mother, *“but don’t be afraid. I’m with you.”*

So the men brought Jacob and his mother outside the village and put their coats over Jacob’s back. *“Is someone going to ride me?”* Jacob wondered. *“I’ve never carried a man before. I hope I will be strong enough.”*

He was also worried about the person who was going to ride him. He'd seen some pretty mean people ride the other donkeys before. Sometimes they yelled at the donkeys or even hit them with a stick.

But all of his fears vanished right away when he met the rider. The other men called him Jesus. Jesus smiled kindly at Jacob and stroked his back with his big, strong hands. *"Hello, little donkey,"* he said. *"You will carry me into Jerusalem today."*

Jacob's heart skipped a beat. *"Jerusalem!"* thought Jacob. *"Whoopee! We're going to Jerusalem after all."* So Jesus mounted on Jacob's back and off they went.

As they approached Jerusalem the excitement in the air continued to build. Jesus sat on Jacob's back, and Jacob's mother walked beside them. Large numbers of people lined up along both sides of the road. Some of them lay their coats down in the road for Jacob to walk across. Others cheered and waved palm branches back and forth. Some of them even bowed low to the ground as he passed by. Singing, shouting and rejoicing filled the air around him. Jacob didn't understand all the words, but he heard people shouting things like, *"Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

*"I must be the most important donkey in the city,"* thought Jacob, *"perhaps the most important donkey in the whole world!"* And so, the little donkey held his head high as he marched strongly and bravely into the city carrying Jesus on his back. It was the proudest moment in Jacob's life.

It was late when they entered Jerusalem. Jesus slipped off Jacob's back and disappeared into the temple. *"Come,"* said Jacob's mother, *"we must find shelter for the night."*

They found a small stable where Jacob's mother tucked him into the straw and kissed him good night. *"You've had quite the exciting day,"* she said. *"I'm so proud of you. Now go to sleep."*

Jacob tried to sleep, but he couldn't stop thinking about the amazing things that had just happened to him. *"All those people cheering and shouting...for me!"* he thought. *"I can't wait for tomorrow! Perhaps there will be even more people. Perhaps they will honor me with presents and gifts this time!"* Jacob finally fell asleep in the straw, dreaming about parades and music and people cheering.

He woke up early the next morning. His mother was still sleeping, but he couldn't wait. *"I must go into Jerusalem,"* he thought. *"The people will be waiting for me."*

So off he ran to the marketplace. Large groups of people were already up and about. Jacob marched proudly down the center of the road waiting for the people to start cheering. But they didn't make a sound. They didn't even notice him!

*"Hey, everybody! It's me, Jacob!"* he called out. But the people just kept right on with what they were doing. No one waved any palm branches and no one put any coats on the ground.

So Jacob went to the area outside the temple. *“Perhaps they will notice me here,”* he thought. Once again, he called out to the people and even ran around and kicked up his heels. But no one paid any attention to him. It was almost as if they didn’t recognize him.

Jacob ran back to his mother, crying and confused. He found her and threw himself upon her, just sobbing and sobbing. *“I don’t understand it, mother, I don’t understand,”* he wept. *“I thought they all loved me. Yesterday they treated me like a king! And now they act as if I wasn’t there. One of them even yelled at me! I don’t understand! Why are they treating me so differently?”*

Jacob’s mother looked sadly and lovingly at her poor, sobbing son. She leaned forward and kissed him gently on the forehead. *“Foolish donkey,”* she replied, *“don’t you see, that without Him, you are nothing?”* Without Christ, we are nothing! Let that sink in for a moment.

A lot happened in that one week between Palm Sunday and Easter. On Monday and Tuesday the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders escalated. On Wednesday Judas met with the religious leaders and arranged for Jesus’ betrayal. On Thursday Jesus met with his disciples in the Upper Room and shared the Last Supper, and later that night he was arrested while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Early Friday morning Jesus was tried before Pilate and sentenced to death. By Friday evening Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. But on Sunday morning the tomb was empty. And because Christ lives, the powers of evil and death have suffered a mortal blow.

In every part of the New Testament the resurrection story comes up again and again. When the first Christians preached, they didn’t mention Bethlehem but instead talked about the empty tomb. They never got over the fact that on Easter Sunday when they went to the tomb, Jesus was gone. I saw a marquee in front of a local church a while ago that caught my attention. It read like this: *“The tomb is empty. No bones about it.”*

And that’s exactly right! If the bones of Jesus could be dug up in some first century tomb, we can close the doors to the church and all go home. If Christ is not risen, then our hope is hopeless because the Christian hope is not just that God will give us a better life in this life but that there’s life beyond this life.

So, if Christ is not risen, then this life lacks meaning and purpose. But if Christ is risen, then not even death ultimately matters.

I’m reminded of what one young man said when he was facing possible death after a heart attack. He said: *“If I die, I get to go see my parents. If I live, I get to see my son grow up. Christ is with me, and so either way I win.”*

Sadly, the same crowd that gave Jesus praise upon his entry to Jerusalem later called for his crucifixion. As professing Christians, we can also fall prey to this kind of hypocrisy when we honor Christ with our mouths, but our hearts are far away from Him. It’s been said that we are Easter people living in a Good Friday world, meaning our allegiance is fickle and short-lived. So let’s think of today as D-Day, the first day of a week that quietly shook the world, the prelude to Christ’s passion, and the launching of His Lordship.

Let's remember, too, that if Christ is risen, nothing else really matters. Any way you look at it, life is certainly worth the living because Christ lives. On the other hand, if Christ isn't risen, well, you heard the donkey. Without Christ we are nothing. AMEN.