



## Preview of the future

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne April 5, 2009

**Introduction to blessing of the palms:** Palm Sunday is a day with two different stories of Jesus walking through the streets of Jerusalem. The two stories offer us two different visions of Jesus. Which one is right? First we have Jesus entering Jerusalem to the shouts of the crowds as they proclaim him king. They waved palm branches and sang hymns of praise. Then only a few days later, this same Jesus walked through the same streets, with many of the same people making up the crowd, only this time he was carrying a cross. The crowds no longer praised him, they yelled at him. Seen from a human perspective it's the first parade that seems to show God's glory and power. Seen from a Christian perspective, though, it's this second parade that completes the first one. For the sound of "Hosanna" says Jesus is the King of kings, but it takes the cross to tell us the truth, the whole truth, that Jesus had not come to reign on a throne and to throw his weight around. He had come to reign over your life and to help you carry your burdens. That's why we retell both stories. They both point us to the truth of Jesus the king.

### Reading from 1 Timothy 6

*I command you before God, who gives life to all, and before Christ Jesus, who gave a good testimony before Pontius Pilate, that you obey his commands with all purity. Then no one can find fault with you from now until our Lord Jesus Christ returns. For at the right time Christ will be revealed from heaven by the blessed and only almighty God, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He alone can never die ... to him be honor and power forever.* (NLT)

### Song: Arise, king of kings

*We call upon your name O Lord, The name that is holy  
We call upon your name O Lord, The name that is holy  
We call upon your name O Lord,  
We come to bring our praise to the One  
Who was, who is, and is to come ...  
Arise, King of kings, God of all creation, O Lord we cry  
Arise, King of kings, the father to the nations  
The rock of our salvation ... O God arise*

### Reading from John 11

*A man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany. When Jesus got the message, he said, "This sickness is not fatal. It will become an occasion to show God's glory by glorifying God's Son." Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, but oddly, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed on where he*

*was for two more days. He then announced, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep. I'm going to wake him up." Jesus became explicit: "Lazarus died. And I am glad for your sakes that I wasn't there. You're about to be given new grounds for believing. Now let's go to him." When Jesus finally got there, he found Lazarus already four days dead ... He said, "Where did you put him?" They said, "Master, come and see."*

### Video Clip from *The Greatest Story Ever Told*

*[Now Jesus wept ... Some among them said, "Well, if he loved him so much, why didn't he do something to keep him from dying? After all, he opened the eyes of a blind man." Then Jesus ... arrived at the tomb. It was a simple cave in the hillside with a slab of stone laid against it. [39] Jesus said, "Remove the stone." The sister of the dead man, Martha, said, "Master, by this time there's a stench. He's been dead four days!" Jesus looked her in the eye. "Didn't I tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" Then he shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" And he came out, a cadaver, wrapped from head to toe, and with a kerchief over his face. Jesus told them, "Unwrap him and let him loose."]*

**Intro to message:** Right before the first Palm Sunday, Jesus visited the outskirts of Jerusalem. He timed things just right so his friend Lazarus would be dead, and the Passover festival would only be a few days away. It was all part of the plan. It was all set so Jesus would come to the tomb where Lazarus lay, and work a miracle to bring him back to life. He had come later than expected. Lazarus' family and friends kept complaining, "Jesus if you had only been here, he would not have died." But Jesus had timed it so that Lazarus would be dead, had been dead for four days. Lazarus was not just dead, he was good and dead. His plan was to give people a miracle that would teach them God had power even over the grave. What better way to explain this than through a dramatic action? Jesus had already taught them, "The Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may have it back again. No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily. For I have the right to lay it down when I want to and also the power to take it again." [John 10:17-18 NLT] But would his followers remember what he had said? Do we remember all Jesus has said? Not so much. So, as we have seen throughout this series on miracles, it's one thing to teach people with words, it's another thing to teach people by example. Now, at the gates of Jerusalem with so little time left, Jesus needed to teach people a lesson they would not forget. He wanted them to remember this when it came time next week for Jesus to take the place of Lazarus in the tomb.

All this talk about raising someone from the dead seems hard to accept. I make no excuses for that. It's supposed to be hard to accept that a person who has been dead can come back to life without any medical procedures or rational explanations. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about Lazarus, or Jesus on Easter. Dead is dead. People can't come back from being dead like that. And as for the suggestions that Jesus (after being tortured, beaten, bleeding nearly to death on the way to the cross, then having a spear thrust into his heart) might have only passed out and woke up when he hit the cold rock of the tomb is just silly. The appearance of Jesus after Easter, risen from the dead, would not excite faith if he came out looking bloody, bruised and beaten. And Lazarus was certainly dead, too, even if without the bruises. Dead is dead. The people who lived in ancient times knew dead when they saw it, or in the case of Lazarus when they smelled it. But dead is not dead to God. That's what makes this miracle the center point of Christian faith. Either this happened, or it's all make believe. And if it's make believe there's no reason to believe anything Jesus did can make a difference in your life.

Well this miracle was certainly was big news back then. As you saw in the video, in a made for Hollywood kind of scene of course, you see the news spread quickly to Jerusalem that Jesus had done the impossible. He had shown everyone he had the power to heal, yes, and now that he had the power of life in his hands. It was this news that made the crowds excited to see the miracle worker enter the city. It was for this reason the religious leaders wanted to see Jesus ... out of the way.

What happened in the next few days was odd. The only way I can explain it is in terms of something we know well enough in our day. Last week we had our annual celebration of that unofficial holiday. It's a day some folk keep religiously and others not so much. I try to ignore it, but that doesn't make it go away. Sure enough, every year on April 1st we live through another April Fool's Day. Each year, there are the fake news stories on NPR and the BBC, there are pranks played by the scores by people who somehow think they've been given permission to trick me merely by turning over a calendar page. I don't get it. After a little research I've learned two things about April Fool's Day ... no one is sure how the day or its custom of pranks got started, and if you are not very imaginative, the internet will give you all kinds of good ideas for next year's pranks ... such as ...

1. With the kitchen-sink sprayer facing forward and the water off, wrap a rubber band tightly around the trigger so it is locked in the "on" or "fire" position. Then wait for the next person to turn on the faucet.
2. Glue a couple of quarters to your driveway or sidewalk. Then sit back and watch your kids drive themselves batty trying to pick them up.
3. After everyone's asleep, set all the clocks ahead one hour. Then wake everyone up (at the usual time) scream-

ing about how they overslept, missed the bus, are going to be late for school or work, etc.

4. Tell someone how badly you're going to get them on the big day. Then tell them again. Tease them. Laugh at them. Tell them there's nothing they can do about it. Then just sit back and relax as their paranoia grows.

5. If your kids eat apples for lunch, carefully core a thin deep hole in the fruit and retain the plug. Stuff several gummi worms deep inside, then replace the end of the plug to conceal your handiwork.

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Well, OK, those are not the biggest pranks to play, and I'll thank you to keep them to yourselves. But you get the idea. Pranks trick people into believing something that isn't real, so you can laugh when they discover they've been tricked. Which makes me wonder if the first Palm Sunday occurred on the first of April. You see the crowds were expecting Jesus the Messiah to show up. And he did, coming in on a donkey, with the

crowds around him cheering. His first act was to dramatically take the Temple by storm, and quite literally, he turned the tables on the religious leaders. But then Jesus turned out to be less than they expected, or something very different. So the crowds turned on him. They must have thought it was all a joke, a trick, this Jesus as king.

I suppose that helps explain why the crowds were largely against Jesus by the end of the week. They were disappointed in Jesus. It left others to wonder ... to wonder why things were turning out the way they were. Was there a reason? Was the cross really God's Plan A, or was it just something that happened when everything else went bad? People to this day, maybe some of you, ask the same question. Was there a plan in all of this? Did Jesus really have to die? Some have even wondered whether Jesus himself may have had a moment of doubt, a very human reluctance to go through with the master plan, you know, with the Master's plan. Maybe he too, like many who watched, wanted to know why it all had to happen this way. Why God? Why?

## **Solo: Why**

*as recorded by Nicole Nordemann*

*We rode into town the other day, just me and my Daddy  
He said I'd finally reached that age and I could ride next to  
him on a horse that of course was not quite as wide  
We heard a crowd of people shouting  
And so we stopped to find out why  
And there was that man that my dad said he loved  
But today there was fear in his eyes*

So I said "Daddy, why are they screaming?  
 Why are the faces of some of them beaming?  
 Why is he dressed in that bright purple robe?  
 I'll bet that crown hurts him more than he shows  
 Daddy, please can't you do something?  
 He looks as though he's gonna cry  
 You said he was stronger than all of those guys  
 Daddy, please tell me why,  
 Why does everyone want him to die?"  
 Later that day the sky grew cloudy  
 And Daddy said I should go inside  
 Somehow he knew things would get stormy, boy was he right  
 But I could not keep from wondering  
 If there was something he had to hide  
 So after he left I had to find out  
 I was not afraid of getting lost  
 So I followed the crowds to a hill  
 Where I knew men had been killed  
 And I heard a voice come from the cross  
 And it said, "Father, why are they screaming?  
 Why are the faces of some of them beaming?  
 Why are they casting their lots for my robe?  
 This crown of thorns hurts me more than it shows  
 Father, please can't you do something?  
 I know that you must hear my cry  
 I thought I could handle the cross of this size  
 Father, remind me why, why does everyone want me to die?  
 When will I understand why?"  
 "My precious Son, I hear them screaming,  
 I'm watching the face of the enemy beaming  
 But soon I will clothe you in robes of my own  
 Jesus, this hurts me much more than you know  
 But this dark hour I must do nothing  
 Though I've heard your unbearable cry  
 The power in your blood destroys all of the lies  
 Soon you'll see past their unmerciful eyes  
 Look there below, see the child  
 Trembling by her father's side  
 Now I can tell you why ... she is why you must die"

**Back to the message:** Thank you Christine. That is a truly haunting song ... one that reminds us that the whole of Palm Sunday and the cross was about God giving himself for the sake of one small child, and for other children, and so too, for you and for me. The problem with the song of course is that it makes Jesus appear to not know what's going on ... and I'm sure he knew it very well. He'd been there at the tomb of Lazarus, remember? He knew the power he had over life. It's what he taught long before when he had said, "No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily. For I have the right to lay it down when I want to and also the power to take it again." Folks, get it straight ... That stern old God the Father never made Jesus die on a cross because, as Christians believe, Jesus was God. Jesus chose of his own free will to die on the cross. That was the plan. That had always been the plan. God was not somehow winging this and making it up as he went. The Cross was not Plan B, but the whole thing. And to make sure you understood it all ahead of time, Jesus

gave a preview of the Easter miracle with Lazarus.

Why come into Jerusalem as a king? Why allow yourself to be killed? Why raise Lazarus? It's all done for you. It's all a part of the power of God acted out for you in sharp dramatic detail at the tomb of Lazarus. It's that God gives life. If you believe that, that's life changing right there. The Bible tells us (in a very new translation): *Everything of God gets expressed in Jesus, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.* [Colossians 2:9-10 The Message] Over everything. Sure, that means God had power to give life to Lazarus. It also means God has the power to give you life too. His power extends over everything, so his fullness can come to you. This is what God did in raising Lazarus to life. God showed what he has planned to do for you, starting today.

God's power of life extends over everything. For instance, like your finances. The God who can raise Lazarus up can see you through a layoff, a downturn and the loss of your savings. As the Bible tells us God's plan is for you to prosper, only that does not mean God has promised to give you prosperity. [Jeremiah 29:11 NRSV] Those are different. God will see you through good times and bad, if you trust him to be with you. But God will not magically make a pot of gold appear. God's not a leprechaun. He's the Lord of life and promises to help you live fully, regardless of your finances.

God's power of life extends over your relationships. Good thing. It's probably the same thing with you, but I've noticed that all my relationships are handicapped by the fact I am in them. I bring my own issues with me. I need to be more patient, more willing to take second place, to serve and care and love whether or not I feel loved at the moment. Here too, God can be part of these relationships, and bring a new sense of life into them. His love helps me grow closer to others.

The God who raised Lazarus to life can give you a new sense of life too. Maybe you have doubts, maybe you have a heavy heart. Sometimes, for me, I look in the mirror and I do not see the guy who once smiled more and had an odd sense of humor. I used to find Monty Python very funny, and Woody Allen. Now, not so much. You can say I am growing up, or it may be that I'm growing colder, not just older. I see a grayer face some days in the mirror. It's not the gray in my hair, it's the look in my eyes. I feel sometimes I've lost some of my joy. I can blame it on all sorts of things, but the real answer is not in my health or my wealth. It's in the sense of joy that comes from knowing God is near. And that he has power to raise me up more than once, to raise me up day by day. I pray for that ....

So today as I sing "Hosanna" I know I need God's miracle of new life. I don't want to go through life feeling half dead, I want to feel fully alive. I know, too, that's exactly God's plan, it's actually his pleasure to give you and me a taste of his life-giving Spirit. Folks, so many of the things you may chase after to give you a sense of life or joy do not give life so much as suck the life out of you. The bigger house comes with a bigger

mortgage and bigger maintenance costs. That romantic fling leads not to more life but less as you end up covering your tracks. All that stuff you buy stops being as much fun when you have to store it, clean it, maintain it, insure it. Keeping up with everything in life, like keeping up appearances, sucks the life out of you in the long run. But God has the power to give you life. A life focused on God brings freedom.

Jesus called into the tomb, "*Lazarus come out.*" He did. I pray you will too, that you'll hear the voice of Jesus calling you to come out from any of the dark places in your life. Let him unbind you and set you free. That's his plan for you. That's the whole reason he came to be with us, and even, to die for us. Everything he did, was done so you would come out and be free. If only you will listen to his voice and take the next step forward my friends. New life awaits you, here and now ... and an eternal life awaits you when you believe. You simply don't have to do this on your own. God has come just so you would come to him ...

### **Song: So you would come**

*Before the world began you were on his mind  
And every tear you cry is precious in his eyes  
Because of his great love he gave his only son  
Everything was done so you would come  
Nothing you can do could make him love you more  
And nothing that you've done could make him close the door  
Because of his great love he gave his only Son  
Everything was done so you would come  
Come to the Father though your gift is small  
Broken hearts, broken lives he will take them all  
The power of the word, the power of his blood  
Everything was done so you would come*