

Palm Sunday – April 16-17, 2011
Luke 22:39-23:56

This past week, in the education building, the preschool prepared itself for Easter break. Walls were decorated with giant Easter eggs cracked open with pictures of preschoolers popping out. Giant bunny rabbits were hopping across walls with spring flowers marking their path. Every spring color from lilac, to robin's egg blue was on display. It's just the way preschool should be: bright and cheerful and full of hope for a new season. The campus of Christ Church is just a happier, more joyful and a better place when your children are prancing up and down the aisles and through the halls, and running across the lawn, like last Sunday for the Easter Egg Hunt, spreading joy. And, when the preschoolers march into chapel on Wednesday mornings, we know we're destined for some really good time with Jesus. This past week the children, more than excited than usual for their anticipated break, gathered for chapel, here in the worship space. Now, these children are not just budding theologians. They are brilliant, thoughtful believers, eager to take in the stories of God's love.

This week, of course, we spent some time in the Easter story. First, we gathered with Jesus and the disciples at the Mount of Olives. We journeyed to the cross and hung our heads low and mourned at the news of Jesus' crucifixion. Sorrowfully, we carried Jesus to the tomb. Then, we peered with amazing wonder into the tomb to see the brilliantly glistening angel explain, "Jesus is not here." Then, because children always live with hope and simply believe so readily, we all hugged and celebrated that Jesus is risen, Jesus is alive. Hannah Tittermary, standing in the front of the pack, at the foot of the cross, just couldn't contain herself any longer. Hannah raised her hand and shouted out, "Mrs. Hillary, is this really true. Did this really happen?" Yes, Hannah it's true. It's all true. We can believe it. That Jesus lived and died for us and rose for us! It's true, Hannah. Because of Jesus, we are saved!!!

Jesus, now, resolutely turning toward Jerusalem has traveled the dusty, turbulent road, and humbly, triumphantly enters Jerusalem at the Passover Feast. Jerusalem, the core, the navel, the very center of the universe. All that is in God and is God, flows from Jerusalem. The crowds, jubilant, wave tree branches and re-enact a royal procession, spreading their cloaks along his path, crying out, "blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Then, dramatically, the mood shifts. Jesus assembles his disciples in the upper room, where around his holy table, he institutes for us, our sacred meal of thanksgiving, The Holy Eucharist, by which we will always remember him. This table that brings the lost and forgotten, the confused and troubled. The same table that hosts disciples like Judas who in just hours will succumb to fear, jealousy and greed, accepting a devilish pay off in exchange for betrayal. Disciples like Peter who sharpen the story in the dark of night with denial when temptation can so get the better of us. But, because Jesus loves so deeply, and believes so assuredly in us, he confers upon his beloved disciples, the kingdom of God. Together they climb the Mount of Olives to pray. Just before the sun sets that ominous evening, Jesus scans across the horizon and looks down upon a city built by people of God, surrounded by walls built by the faithful prophet Nehemiah to

contain the holiness of God; a city where Jesus knows that in just two short generations Herod's fortress of oppression and cruelty will fall, and as then, is now and will be forever, the kingdom of God will prevail.

The author of John's gospel paints an adversarial, tension filled picture. Judas, leading a cohort from the Roman garrison, along with Roman guards, marching under the authority of the chief priests and Pharisees, all armed with weapons, burst in on Jesus' solitude, ready to do battle. The power of God's protective grace always conquers. Jesus makes himself known. The garrison falls back, bowing down in awe. Jesus is led away to the high priest, named in Matthew's and John's gospel as Caiaphas.

Back to Luke, the narrative shifts in focus, away from Jesus, to Peter. The gospel writer really wants us to pay attention to Peter. Peter, not willing to fully abandon Jesus, follows at a distance. The other ten are nowhere to be found. How many times can we claim ourselves as Peters. Wanting so to give our all in response to Jesus' love for us, and yet we hold back, we hesitate, and just like Peter, we even deny we know Jesus. But, as is always the way with Jesus, hope springs eternal. In just days, it will be Peter who leads the effort to bring all to believe in the saving grace of Jesus Christ (Acts 4).

Showering Jesus with insults and abuse, he's dragged before the Sanhedrin; a body of church leaders, priests and scribes. They carry extensive knowledge in both God's Law and civil law and believe themselves to be experts in guarding Jewish custom, Jewish life and Jewish law. After extensive interrogation about his Messiahship and his divine sonship, and confirmed, by Jesus' own lips to be guilty of blasphemy, the Sanhedrin send him over to the Roman governor, Pilate, who can find no case against him. Pilate bumps him up to King Herod, who is delighted to finally meet Jesus. But, Jesus refusing to play into the politicking, fails to give Herod a reason for sentencing. Herod kicks him back down to Pilate. But, not before tormenting him with mockery and torture. There is no grace in the cruelty of this story, except from Jesus, who refuses to endorse violence and degradation with retaliation. Instead, Jesus innocently endures suffering, and pain, trusting in God's healing power with a love that wins triumphantly.

Three times Pilate pleads with the crowd to release this innocent Jesus. The crowd will not have it. Pilate capitulates. Rather than stir up the crowd any further, in compliance with the custom, he releases Barabbas, a robber, a murderer and a notorious prisoner and hands over the innocent Jesus for crucifixion. Over and over again, Luke's writer wants us to know that Jesus is innocent. His crime: he's faithful in laying down the kingdom of God. His crime: He believes in God's people in God's world, to live as God's loving, forgiving agents; he cherishes God's creation and desires for us to know this loving God who claims us as his own and gives us this life of ours to live to the fullest, in the likeness of God's mercy and grace. His crime: He is Lord. He is our savior.

Nobody really seems to know what to do with this Jesus. Maybe it is that when we're just staring in the face of what is good and loving and just and right, we're just not exactly certain what to do; that the plain, simple truth of God's love for us is just so obvious, we don't always grasp it and instead, we keep looking for something else. But, this is what this Palm Sunday Passion journey is all about. That Jesus loving us so

deeply, humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death upon the cross so we could be transformed in God's merciful, saving love. The crowd is isn't quite ready yet to know Jesus Christ. "Crucify, crucify him," they shout out, verifying Jesus status, not as Lord, but as a criminal. Crucifixion is the typical form of execution in Roman times, especially among rebellious slaves and outspoken insurrectionists who must bear their punishment publicly humiliated. Two fellow criminals, tax evaders, thieves, runaway slaves, counted among the lawless, are mounted on crosses on either side of Jesus. Nailed to the cross, this king of the Jews, once again, turns the Roman kingdom upside down. He prays, "forgive them, Father, they do not know what they are doing," establishing for us God's kingdom, God's world of grace and mercy. The crowds of frightened mourners, curiosity seekers, and Roman soldiers hear Jesus' final words; not accusatory words of blame and shame; but, simple, powerful words of forgiveness.

This is not our most shining moment. How often have we reflected on those times when we have failed to trust in Jesus as our savior? When, we succumb to the weight of life's burdens and fail to release them to the miracle of God's grace? Jesus knows this about us and turns to us from his cross with an offering of grace. On the cross, flanked by two criminals, one, ridiculing, the other, grateful for salvation, begs for Christ to remember him. Jesus, promises, he will be with him in paradise, a reminder to the Jewish onlookers that paradise is not what is to come. Paradise is God's saving world, here and now, on earth, as it is in heaven. Breathing his last, Jesus commends his spirit back to God; final words not words of abandonment, but words of union.

This story is not just a journey to death. This is the story of our salvation. Jesus suffers for us so that we may be saved from fear, apprehension, and indifference; saved from our collective wrong, what we do in war, and pollution and injustice and prejudice, hatred, greed; saved from jealousy, resentment and bitterness. Jesus died to bring us to terms with the pain and suffering of the memory we hold this weekend, in the tragedy of Virginia Tech, just four years ago. Jesus died to save us from our sins; to bring about God's kingdom; to bring about God's world; a world of love and grace and mercy; a world where we see one another as God sees us, good, loving, compassionate.

How many times have we heard this story? Dozens, hundreds perhaps for some of us. And each time we hear it, we try to grasp the magnitude of what Jesus does for us in going to the cross; in how God in Christ can love us so much that he's willing to die for us.

Throughout Christianity, we've been taught that Jesus is our salvation. Salvation means, rescue. In fact, the Hebrew root of Jesus' name is the word, rescue. For some, we've been taught that salvation is what happens when we reach heaven's gates. Salvation is in our afterlife. Not exactly. Jesus' salvation, Jesus' rescue for us, comes now, in this moment, in us, with those around us, known to us and not known, on earth, and in heaven.

You probably know of the organization, Christian Aid that serves all over the world fighting to eradicate poverty and injustice. Several years ago, they coined the slogan, "We believe in life before death." This is Jesus' intent for us in his journey to the cross.

This is Jesus' passion for us, to know his life, his love, right now, this day, tomorrow and then next day and to live our lives always in response to his love for us. Jesus saves. Jesus' saving is what transforms us to be God's most glorious, love filled, hope filled people.

There's more...Jesus' journey does not stop at the cross or at the closed tomb. We're reminded that we are Easter people. That Jesus' journey to the cross is the ultimate story of love; a love that rescues; a love that saves us and equips us and outfits us for God's world, to do God's work; a powerful love that surprises us into correction and compassion, kindness and patience, trust and truth. This week, my friends, may we walk along with Jesus as he journeys to the cross for our salvation. May we give thanks that Jesus is risen; that Easter comes over and over again; that we are saved, now, for the freedom of love and forgiveness; that in heaven and on earth and under the earth, every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!
Now, here's the story. It's the truth!!

Throughout the centuries smart thinkers have developed a lot of theories about what salvation means. Here are some theories around our salvation: The oldest is the Ransom theory. Jesus offered himself as a ransom, paying the price for our freedom from sin. The Recapitulation theory teaches that Jesus is the new Adam. Essentially, Jesus reverses the wrong done by Adam and Eve in the garden with his death upon the cross. In the Satisfaction theory we have offended God's honor and dignity and Christ is the only one who is able to restore us to full allegiance to God.

Each year about this time, there is always at least one newspaper headline or featured magazine article about why Jesus died. Why did Jesus come to save us? One other popular and more theory is Liberation Theory. Jesus has freed us from our personal sins, and our sins of neglect with our brothers and sisters across the globe. The word salvation actually means, rescue.

Pick your theory of salvation, my friends, should you need to have some deeper, intellectual sense of why Jesus did this miraculous act for us, giving us his life, so that we may have new life, a forgiven life, a free life, a life redeemed and made new.