

A Colt Never Ridden

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Mark 11:1-11

Palm Sunday

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(Harry Potter Film Clip – Platform 9 ¾)

Not all thresholds are the same. In fact, the platforms that appear to be the same are not the same, depending on who you are. For some the world is simply a three-dimensional machine. But for others that same world is enchanted, with unseen powers at work, known to those who have eyes to see them.

And of course our experience informs that. For one person, a tourist, a stroll through the vast cemeteries at Normandy is interesting; look how the hundreds of crosses are lined up so precisely! But for another, one who knows the name inscribed on that stone, it is a sacred portal to another time/place, another dimension. The same physical place, but for one it is material and for another quite spiritual.

And so when we describe the entrance of Jesus and his disciples into Jerusalem you could describe it as

a quite ordinary occurrence, depending on the point of view.

If you are a beggar outside the gates these could be donors to fill your cup with a coin of mercy. If you are a baker selling your bread just inside the gates these are Passover pilgrims just like all the rest and they may buy your wares. If you are a Roman soldier this rather unconventional display represents yet another security risk. If you are a temple priest you may see this as the latest challenge to your orthodoxy. And if you are a random member of the crowd you may be thrilled by the drama, the rumor of celebrity, a heightened expectation for something more important than another day of occupation.

To be sure, there is much that makes this micro-procession of Jesus and his disciples ordinary, like the Hosannas of the chanted Passover liturgy and the traditional pathway up to the city gates. But what you see is *not* what you get. To ordinary eyes this is just a typical platform. But if you look very carefully it is really gate 9 ¾.

As opposed to the Roman entrances happening on the other side of the city, entrances adorned with horse and chariot, Roman standards and trumpets, this entrance is accompanied by no fanfare, save that of the creaky voices of peasants. Instead of fine cloth covering the ground for the revered monarch to pass, branches are cut from the trees and placed under passing hooves.

Then you see him and what he is riding. He comes humbly, riding a beast of burden. And everything starts to shift. There is something strange about this parade just as there is something strange about him. As every expectation is challenged the foundations of time and space shake, if you can feel it. And then we remember one detail we earlier passed over without a second thought: the colt had never been ridden.

The unriden colt refers to the purity of the beast, of course, that it has not been profaned by any other use. But there is more.

The colt has never been ridden because this man has never been here before in this way, and is crossing a threshold that has never been crossed before, not in this way. The feet of scores of colts and pilgrims and priests and soldiers have pounded these stones and passed through these gates for centuries, but not this colt, not this man, not this moment. Because in the fabric of space and time, ever so often, there is an anomaly, a divine eruption, a holy exception.

You know those first time thresholds in your life, don't you?

This week we were in Rocheport and came upon a young woman we know from town. She was corralling her three year old son by holding onto the top of his hoodie even as her new born was strapped to her with her baby sling. And she smiled the kind of smile one does when you are barely keeping your head above water and said, "Every day is the best day of my life and worst day of my life."

Face it, nothing prepares you to cross that Rubicon, no matter how many people have studied or written about it. When you cross over the territory is brand spanking new. You don't know the meaning of sleep deprivation until you are deprived and still have to get up for the feeding. Or clean up the messes. Or just navigate the appointments.

When we cross first-time thresholds we enter the baffling land of "we've never been here before." We realize we're an adult and have to take responsibility. We lose a job for the first time. We take a new job. We get married. We get divorced. We lose someone we love. We become empty nesters. We become grandparents. A tornado blows our town away. We get diagnosed. We live but someone else doesn't make it. Our children have challenges we would have never imagined. We get baptized. We change churches in our adulthood. We check out of church in our adulthood. We check back into church in our adulthood. We witness our society pass through baffling times. We travel to Katmandu and wrangle with street vendors over a carpet.

There's no rule book for all this, no matter how much people research and write. Someday you put on the water skis and have to discover what it means to let the velocity and water lift you.

Every so often we cross first-time thresholds.

The simple and often-missed truth is this: Jesus is crossing a first-time threshold whether anyone else can see it or not. He rides a colt that has never been ridden before. No matter if it looks like a regular gate it is really gate 9 $\frac{3}{4}$.

When Jesus crosses that threshold it's like crossing from day to night. The whole past three years of moving about small villages, teaching and healing, is like a blur behind him. And now even though the beggar, baker, priest, or soldier, or his disciples, or random people in the crowd don't see it, he has passed over the threshold into a cosmic story, one that will outlast him and everyone else who happened to be in that city at that moment.

And twenty centuries later no one will write or sing inspirational songs about Pilot or Herod or any other bad actors who didn't really know what was happening. They will write songs about him, the One who crossed that threshold on that day.

Crossing the threshold into Jerusalem was like launching down a water slide; there is no turning back. All that's left is careening down the circuit. For Jesus it was going to turn ugly; when you stir up the hornet's nest they come out to sting you. And they did.

Our men's group just finished a long-term study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As a pastor who was part of the spiritual and physical resistance to fascism and the 3rd Reich, Bonhoeffer had to take a stand. His preparation for this was incremental, walking down the path of first opting out the state Lutheran church because it had become entangled with a theology of empire. He became a part of the underground Confessing church. He headed an illegal seminary. He finally stood against the ruthless extermination of the Jews.

When he visited the United States and New York for his last time he could have stayed there in exile until the end of the war, returning to help rebuild his nation and the church. But gnawing away at him was the conviction that unless he shared his people's suffering with them he would have to moral right to return afterward. After 17 days in New York he headed to the harbor and caught the last ocean liner back to Germany before war was declared.

This was the crossing of the threshold for Bonhoeffer; he knew what meant; he was heading back into the jaws of Hitler's death machine and he morally felt that he no choice but to return and to resist. "Being obedient unto death" became more than a nice little Bible memory verse. When he stepped aboard that ship he was crossing the threshold into Jerusalem. There would be no turning back.

Whether it is Jesus, Bonhoeffer, or a contemporary person of faith who is compelled to resist, to stand against injustice, violence, hatred, corruption,

immortality, inhumanity, distortions of the Christian faith of our day, regardless – what is required is a abandonment to the will of God, a courageous leap into the unknown trusting that doing the right, or at least the right as far as far as we can know it, will be accompanied by a grace that will not let us go, will not abandon us. When we stand steadfast in the face of huge powers that conflict with every value we know is central to the Gospel, then, at that intersection, that threshold, we can experience the peace that passes all understanding. When the time of testing comes, will we stand the test?

In the end, crossing the threshold at the right time and place is the most faithful thing we can do. It's a 9 ³/₄ plunge, taking place during perhaps the best and worst moment of your life, living in the humility of the one who rides a colt that has never been ridden, surrounded not by the beautiful people, or people with great power, or perfect people but people who know their need of God and dare to walk that way. Like Jesus, thanks be to God.
Hosanna in the highest.