

Sermon: Were You There?  
Text: Matthew  
Date: April 9, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
Palm Sunday  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?"*

Matthew 21:10

Four days from now, or, to be more precise, four nights from now, we will commemorate and remember that final night Jesus spent with his disciples.

The night he shared the Passover feast with them one last time; the night he instructed them to remember him every time they ate of that bread and drank from that cup.

The night he issued that one final command, the one that summed up everything he taught them, everything he stood for. The command that was both new and old, easy and very difficult: love one another, even as I have loved you.

And this year we have a very special evening planned to commemorate that night. As you've noted in your bulletin, Julie Caro, a professor of art history at WWC is going to do a lecture on the religious work of celebrated African American artist Allan Crite.

Afterward we are going to gather in the sanctuary, where we eat that bread, and drink that cup and we will remember Jesus, and reflect on his command to love one another. And then the evening will conclude with a special performance of the African American spiritual, *Were You There*, featuring the vocal and musical talents of Rodney Lytle and Melodee and Michael Lyshon.

You might get chills just thinking about that prospect. What makes that old song so memorable, so moving, so powerful, so perfect in that context, is that it invites listeners to imagine that they were there, bearing witness to the dramatic events that unfolded the next day.

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?  
Were you there when they pierced him in the side?  
Were you there when the sun refused to shine?  
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?  
O! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.  
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?*

The power comes from imagining you were in fact there. As we saw last week when we looked at the story of Lazarus, the Bible's stories aren't just true because they happened. They're true because they describe the human condition, and so they are still true today.

Those impulses that led to that dark day when they crucified my Lord? Those are alive in us. Rembrandt knew this. That's why he painted himself into his masterwork, *Raising the Cross*. Yes, I was there. I'm there now.

When we think of this story for today, the so called Triumphal Entry, we mainly focus on the cheering crowds, the streaming throng who spread their cloaks on the road before the approaching Christ, and waved the palm branches in the air and shouted their hosannas.

But they are not the only actors in this story. There were two groups in play that day. The people in the crowd, and the people in the city.

We'll come back to the latter group in a bit. But as for the crowd, here, finally, Matthew names what's been true all along. There's been a crowd following Jesus probably from day one.

Not just the twelve disciples. And not just the women who were close to Jesus, or to the handful of men in his inner circle, but an actual crowd, like the groupies that tour with big rock stars, following them from city to city.

Sure, maybe it was a small group at first but the numbers steadily swelled as the reports of this man's actions continued to spread, expanding like the loaves and fish he's said to have multiplied.

And the group has continued to grow until, now, the crowd that is about to roll into Jerusalem is sizeable. What they may not know is that another crowd is there, waiting for them. Yes, the city's denizens are out in the streets partly because it's Passover, the foundational holiday of the Jewish people.

But Matthew tells us that, “the city is in turmoil.” That’s odd language to describe a religious festival. Apparently, Jerusalem is in an uproar. Perhaps because, as the biblical scholars John Dominick Crossan and Marcus Borg have pointed out, the Romans are in town, too, keeping watch on the people.

For Passover isn’t just any holiday. It celebrates the liberation of God’s people from political oppression. And so the soldiers are there to make sure the people don’t get any wild ideas and take this story too literally.

It seems likely that the Jewish people feel their presence and resent it; that they are chaffing under authoritarian rule. The world they’ve always known and loved is changing, being unmade; their beloved institutions dismantled or corrupted. And they have taken to the streets to make their resistance known.

Everyone is antsy and on edge. The citizens, the soldiers, the leader of the temple, the leaders of the army. As Jesus approaches the gates, right before he plunges into the maelstrom that awaits him, that’s when you get this feeling you sometimes get watching a scary movie.

You know the one: No, no, no! Don’t open that door! Don’t you know this is a scary movie? Whatever you do, don’t go down into that basement. Nothing good will come of this. Horror literally awaits you down there.

No, Jesus, no, no, no! I beg you, don’t go through those gates. Nothing good can come of this. At the very least conflict -- and maybe much worse -- awaits you there.

But of course he pays you no mind, and rides on ahead. Which is where we find ourselves today. With Jesus, smack in the middle of all this tumult and chaos.

This year for Lent we decided not to build our worship experience around a given theme. On the first Sunday of Lent we read that the Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness. So we opted to follow that example, and to simply dive into these texts to see where the Spirit might lead us as we explored them together.

So today, as we follow that lead, I want to invite you to locate yourself in this story. (We’ve done this before but if it helps to do this, let me invite you to close your eyes, and listen not just with your ears or your mind or your heart. Listen with your imagination.)

And we begin with the same searching question we'll hear again on Thursday night: Were you there that day? Were you part of this crowd? Were you there when they brought him that young colt. Were you there when he rode it into town? Where you there when they asked him who he was?

Were you there? If so, why?

Maybe you're there now, in Jerusalem, because you were there at the very beginning. You were there just outside the city, way back, on that day when Jesus came to be baptized by John. Because you had come out to be baptized, too.

You'd made a mess of your life. A combination of bad choices and bad breaks left you feeling like you needed a fresh start, a new beginning. You needed to feel clean again. You needed to feel loved again. You needed to feel hope again.

You didn't know who he was then. But you were about to find out because you were standing right behind him in the line. You watched as John dunked him and when he rose out of that water, you heard a voice, surely God's voice, boom from above, *You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.*

From that moment, you knew the world was about to turn, that this was no ordinary pilgrim, come to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

This was the one you'd been waiting for, the one who was willing to go down in the mud with you and raise you up. The one who could set things right again and restore not just your fortunes, but, you hoped, the fortunes of your people.

So for the next three years, you followed him, and you've watched him. You've watched as he disrupted the established order and broke the rules of who deserves to be loved and who doesn't. And so you've watched the inevitable conflict build, along with the size of the crowd following him.

And now it's come to this. It doesn't take a genius to know that you're about to witness a final confrontation, a final showdown. Because, yes, the Romans are out in force.

But the memory of that booming voice, still echoes in your head: *You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.* You're scared to death on the one hand, but you also can't wait to see what happens next.

Maybe you're there now because you were there when the lawyer tried to test him. *Yes, but who is my neighbor?* you heard him ask. The question did not surprise you. This guy had a reputation for cutting corners, looking for the easy way out, apparently true even when it came to the question of how to inherit eternal life.

So the question didn't surprise you, but the answer did: a story in which a Samaritan man -- an unclean outsider -- was the hero. No, it didn't surprise you. It astonished you, and everyone else.

You loved it not just because it made the lawyer, and everyone else, squirm a bit. You loved it because this Jesus just blew the lid off the narrow box in which the religious authorities tried to keep God's love and grace and mercy and favor locked down and contained, restricting those sacred gifts to people who look just like them.

Mostly you loved it because you don't look like them, and because, until this moment, you were an outsider, too. But not anymore. Huzzah, Jesus!

Maybe you're there now because you were there that day when your buddies broke through the roof of your house and let your neighbor down through the newly opened gap in your ceiling. Your paralyzed neighbor.

The authorities are incredulous. "This is highly irregular." "We don't do things this way." "You are out of order here, sir!" "No one can forgive sins but God alone."

Naturally the tension in the room rises, but before it was all over, the man got up off his bed and walked away. Despite your house being damaged, you felt the thrill of it, not just because Jesus once again blew the lid off that tight little locked box, and not just because your paralyzed neighbor walked again.

But because in truth you've felt that way, too. Paralyzed by your fear that you're not enough. Hobbled by the belief, planted in your head somewhere along the way, that you're just another sinner and you don't belong among God's people.

And if this man can rise and walk again, maybe this Jesus can do the same for you. So you've followed him step by step from that moment on. Hosanna!

Or maybe you're there because you were at the scene when Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of that tomb, and were one of the people who Jesus commanded to help unwrap him.

It occurred to you how ironic that was, because, while you've never said this out loud, you have long felt dead inside.

It wasn't a disease that left you feeling this way. Rather life itself had simply ground you down, and steadily stolen your joy, your youth, your vitality, but if this Jesus can restore Lazarus to life, maybe he can do the same for you, too.

Or maybe you're there because you were one of the two blind men Jesus passed on his way out of Jericho, right before this very moment.

You heard the crowd shouting at you to be quiet, as if there was a limit on Jesus's love and mercy, a limit on his power to heal and restore, and they sure as heck didn't want that love and that power to be wasted on you.

But you know better. You know that's not how love works, that's it's not fixed or limited. That the more love you give love away, the more you have to give away.

And so you raised your voice, and caught his attention. And now, sure enough, your eyes are open! And the way before you is clear: "I'm with him!" you declare. And you got up and followed him here.

Or maybe you were just standing there, watching this dramatic healing unfold, realizing how focused you've been on yourself and how blind you have been, to your neighbor in need, or maybe to your wife and children, and to their need to be loved.

In that moment your eyes were opened, and you began to see your neighbor and your family and yourself in a whole new light, the light of love.

And now you can't wait to see what happens next. So you run ahead and cut a palm branch and you wave it, shouting, "Hosanna to Son of David! Love has come to town!"

So here we are. Maybe you heard yourself in one of these stories, and maybe that's why you are here today.

Maybe that's why it was so easy for you to grab one of those palm branches and shout your own hosannas because at some point in your life, the living Christ did for you what the Jesus of history did for the people in these old stories: got you to rise and walk again, to rise and love again, to rise and see again, to rise and live again.

Or maybe not. Maybe for your part you're on the other side of the equation. Maybe you're part of that tumultuous crowd in the city. You're one of the skeptics, the sophisticates, the educated elites.

You have never believed the reports that have been trickling in from the countryside about miraculous healings and miraculous feedings. Just a bunch of feel-good myths, exactly what you'd expect from a bunch of provincial bumpkins.

Or maybe for you, this isn't really the Messiah you want anyway. When it comes to a world as messy and chaotic as this one, love alone is not going to get the job done.

Not when you're up against chariots and soldiers. Not when Caesar's got your people under his thumb. It's going to take more than love. It's going to take active, organized resistance.

So you watch through hard, narrowed eyes as this guy rides into town on that stupid donkey or colt, or whatever it is. You see the two crowds: the one following Jesus, and the one you happen to be standing in. It's like two different rivers coming together, one clear, one muddy.

And right here, right now, those waters collide in a swirling, turbulent confluence. And suddenly that swirling turbulence is happening inside of you.

And so without thinking you find yourself joining in the chorus of people shouting, WHO IS THIS?

It does not occur to you that this may be the most consequential question anyone has ever asked. But suddenly it's the one question your desperate to ask, the one answer you're dying to know.

WHO IS THIS?!

Well, buckle in my friends. One more week and we're about to find out.