

“The Road Leading Down from the Mount of Olives”

Luke 19:28-41

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Last week we were in Bethany, at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. I showed you [this satellite image](#), trying to give you a sense of how close Bethany is to Jerusalem. One of my children informed me later that I didn't *really* show you how close they are, since the map didn't have a scale!

So, let's fix that. Let's try [this map](#). It's got a scale! The left half of the map shows the city of Jerusalem. The thin red lines show you where we think the walls were in the first century. There's also a gray line that shows where a longer wall was built later on. The temple mount is on the east side of the city, right up against the city wall. Then, east of that, there is a deep valley, the Kidron Valley. On the other side of the valley is the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Mount of Olives. Bethphage was a little village more-or-less at the top of the mountain. Bethany was on the far side.

I showed you [this picture](#) last week. Here we are looking east from Jerusalem, at the Mount of Olives. That tall white tower on the peak of the mountain belongs to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Ascension. We'll talk about that around the end of May, when we get to Christ's ascension. But this gives you a sense of the size of the Mount of Olives. It's not a huge mountain. It's more like a big hill. This is the hill that Jesus descended on his way to Jerusalem, that triumphant day, long ago.

Let's go back to [this map](#). The thick red line shows the route Jesus probably took from Bethany to Bethphage to Jerusalem. That was a journey of about two miles: first up, over the Mount of Olives; then down, past the Garden of Gethsemane; then through the Kidron Valley; and then up a pretty steep slope to enter Jerusalem through a gate in the wall. We're going to take that journey with Jesus today.

So [here we are in Bethany](#). This is the modern Palestinian town of al-Eizariya. It is built on the site where Bethany once stood. The name "al-Eizariya" actually means "the place of Lazarus." Obviously the city did not look like this two thousand years ago! Notice the palm trees, though.

[The gospels say](#) that Jesus started his journey to Jerusalem from here. He had spent the night in Bethany. Throughout the last week of his life, he would keep coming back here, to spend the night.

Jesus and his traveling companions walked uphill from here to Bethphage. Today, you can no longer do that. It is not possible to walk from al-Eizariya to Bethany, because the [West Bank Barrier Wall](#) that was built by the Israeli government in 2004 now completely blocks the path. This is what it looks

like in this part of Israel. Here it was built right down the middle of a street. There are buildings on both sides – but you literally cannot get from one side to the other. This wall has been the source of much controversy; the United Nations ruled – by a vote of 144 to 4 – that the wall is in violation of international law and should be removed. But Israel has insisted it will remain.

So **it is no longer possible** to reproduce the route that Jesus took. You can *drive* from Bethany to Bethphage – by a circuitous route that will bring you through an Israeli checkpoint, and will take about an hour – but you can no longer ascend the Mount of Olives on its eastern side, the way Jesus did.

So we just have to jump ahead and place ourselves in Bethphage. We are not entirely certain where Bethphage was – it could have been at any of several spots on the Mount of Olives – but there is **a Franciscan chapel** standing at one of the likely locations. Notice the palm branches standing by the front door. **The chapel is not large**, nor is it particularly grand. There's a simple altar at the front, over which is a mural depicting the events of Palm Sunday. **Here's a closer view**. Jesus is on a donkey; some people are laying their cloaks on the ground; others are carrying palm branches. For it was here in Bethphage, according to Matthew, that Jesus mounted the donkey that would bring him to Jerusalem.

Also in this little chapel is a very large stone. It's there on the floor, on the left side, protected by a wrought-iron grille. **Here's a closer look**. When the Crusaders reclaimed the Holy Land 920 years ago, they found this rock here, and they believed it was the stone Jesus stood on when he mounted the donkey. They decorated it with artwork and inscriptions, depicting scenes from the story. Much of that artwork and those inscriptions are still visible today, nearly a thousand years later.

From Bethphage, Jesus made his way down the Mount of Olives, towards Jerusalem. If we were in Israel on Palm Sunday – which is *next* week, in the Eastern churches – **we could join a Palm Sunday** procession that looks like this: flocks of people, from a multitude of different Christian traditions, from every part of the world, all united together, to walk in the footsteps of our Lord.

As you make your way down from Bethphage, meandering down narrow streets, wending your way between various buildings and houses, you suddenly get **a magnificent view of the city** of Jerusalem. Now you have to imagine this without all the modern buildings and construction. Take away all the tall buildings and the skyscrapers. In the center of the photograph you see a gold dome atop an octagonal-shaped building; that is the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine that has been standing for more than 1300 years, built atop the rocky mount where (according to Jews) God created the world and Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, and where (according to Muslims) Muhammad's Night Journey to Heaven began. But two thousand years ago, in the time of Jesus, that was where the Jerusalem temple stood, with smoke from the daily sacrifices ascending into the heavens. You can see trees and a few buildings surrounding it on all sides; that is the great plaza called the "Temple Mount;" today it feels like a huge park. The whole mount is encased by a tall retaining wall made of limestone. The wall you see here in his picture is the *same* wall that existed in the time of Jesus; it was built by Herod the Great, more than two thousand years ago. You are beholding at the same wall that Jesus himself beheld!

But we still have a ways to go. If you are walking down the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem today there are a number of interesting sites to visit along the way. There is the **Church of Pater Noster**

– the “Our Father” Church – commemorating the moment when Jesus taught his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. (Notice the palm tree.) There is an **extremely large Jewish cemetery**, where remains are encased in stone but not buried. The oldest tombs here are three thousand years old; Jesus would have passed them as he processed down the mountain. In the cemetery are the Tombs of the Prophets, a catacomb reputedly containing the remains of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. A little further down is a chapel called **Dominus Flevit**, “The Lord Weeps.” This chapel was built on the site believed to be the place where Jesus wept over Jerusalem, on his way into Jerusalem, on this very occasion (Luke 19:41). **Here’s what your view of Jerusalem looks like** from inside the chapel. You can see how much lower down we now are; we’re nearly level with the top of the Dome of the Rock.

This picture gives you a sense of where we are. You can see we are getting pretty close to the bottom of the mountain. Notice the people walking down the path at the very bottom of this picture; that is the main road, perhaps the very same road that Jesus himself walked. Notice also the gold spires a little further down: they belong to **this magnificent building**, a Russian Orthodox church dedicated to Mary Magdalene. It was built only about 150 years ago.

As you continue down the hill you come to **the entrance to the Garden of Gethsemane**. We’re not going to visit the Garden today. That’s for Thursday. If you want to see what the Garden of Gethsemane looks like – where Jesus prayed that prayer that is commemorated on that stained glass window here in our sanctuary – well, come back Thursday night.

Past the Garden, Jesus has to cross **the Kidron Valley**. There’s another large cemetery down here, along with hundreds ancient tombs, many of which date back to the time of Jesus, or even before. This place looks barren, compared with the lushness of the Mount of Olives. I’d always thought that the whole journey down the mountain and into the city was beautiful. This part looks practically desolate.

From here, **Jesus had one more hill to climb**: the hill that would lead him into Jerusalem. I wonder what he was thinking as he made his way through this barren valley.

Meanwhile, **the crowds** are surrounding Jesus with jubilant shouts of “Hosanna!” They’re waving those palm branches. They’re praising God for all the things Jesus has done. “Blessings on the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens!” They think this is it, the triumphant climax. Everything is going to go *great* from here on out!

Except ... that it’s not. Betrayal. Suffering. Death. Despair. These are the things that await Jesus, inside the walls of the city. **This is not the last time** that Jesus will enter this city; he will come and go a number of times over the course of the next several days. Back and forth, up and down the Mount of Olives, retreat to Bethany, spend the night, come back to Jerusalem the next morning, day after day –

– **until the day comes** when he will enter the city for the very last time. He won’t spend *that* night in Bethany. He’ll spend *that* night inside the city walls ... locked up in a dungeon.

The King who comes in the name of the Lord has arrived! And here ... his journey will *end*.

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