

## “Four Journeys”

Luke 19:28-40; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14—23:56

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And so Jesus entered Jerusalem, for what was, essentially, his final time. He came by way of Bethany and Bethphage, two villages on the other side of the Mount of Olives. This relief map gives you a sense of that journey. Start on the far right side of the map, in Bethany, the town where Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. Make your way west, climb the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, pass through the village of Bethphage, which is where Jesus picked up a donkey or two, then crest the summit and make your way down the hill towards Jerusalem. If you are in Jerusalem, this is what the Mount of Olives looks like today; it's not *that* large of a hill. As you come down the Mount of Olives you have a magnificent view of the city of Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock – the Muslim shrine in the center of this picture, with that magnificent golden dome – is built right on the spot where the Jewish Temple once stood. Surrounding the shrine is a very large open plaza, covered by trees and surrounded by the more-than-two-thousand-year-old walls that Herod the Great had built. That whole area is called the Temple Mount. Here's an artistic rendering of what the view may have looked like, in Jesus' day.

Jesus makes his way down the western slope of the Mount of Olives. He passes through the Kidron Valley, a deep ravine that separates the Mount of Olives from Jerusalem. Then, to reach the temple, he climbed up a fairly steep slope towards one of the massive gates in the Temple Mount. You can make pretty much that same journey today. Millions of Christians from around the world come to Jerusalem and make that journey in a typical year, following in the footsteps of our Savior.

That is the first of four journeys I want to draw to your attention at the start of this Holy Week.

The second is another journey made by Jesus, a journey that the apostle Paul recounts in his letter to the Christians in Philippi. Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Jesus started out in the realm of eternity, with God. He temporarily set aside his station next to God so that he could empty himself, take on human form, come to this earth, and live as one of us. That is the great incarnation, the event we celebrate every Christmas. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” Paul sums up Jesus' earthly life in one sentence, emphasizing Christ's *humility*, his *obedience*, and his *death*. But his death was not the end: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.” God raised Jesus from the dead, and brought him back – first to earth, and then to the eternal realm, where his journey had begun. The net result was that Jesus went from heaven to earth to death, and back again – a round-trip journey that had as its effect the salvation of our

souls, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

That’s the second journey that I want to draw to your attention at the start of this Holy Week: the incredible journey that Jesus made, as the Nicene Creed puts it, “for us and our salvation.”

The third journey is one we commemorate towards the end of Holy Week, the journey that begins with Jesus sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, at the urging of the crowd, on the morning of Good Friday. He is made to bear the cross that his body will be impaled upon, carrying it through the streets of Jerusalem, to the place outside the city where he was crucified and died. Christian pilgrims to Jerusalem can re-trace that journey on the Via Dolorosa, the “Way of Suffering,” making your way, step by step, towards the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a humble and magnificent church that encompasses two of the most holy sites in Christianity, as they were identified in the fourth century: the place where Christ was crucified and died, and the place where his body was laid in a tomb, and raised to new life. Millions of Christians make that journey every year as well; when Katharine and I were there a few years ago, the church was packed, wall to wall with people, with an hours-long wait to enter the sacred shrine over the site of the empty tomb. These past couple years have seen a lot fewer pilgrims to Jerusalem, but I’m sure this year there will be many more, and especially in the next two weeks. Protestants and Catholics are celebrating Holy Week *this* week; Orthodox Christians will celebrate it *next* week.

Those are the three great journeys that Jesus took that led to our redemption and salvation. We can follow in his footsteps for two of those – the entry into Jerusalem, on Palm Sunday, and the journey to the cross, on Good Friday. In a certain respect we can follow in his footsteps for the third as well – for our faith in Christ enables us to pass from death to eternal life, when the day of *our* death arrives.

But there is also a *fourth* journey I want to draw to your attention: our *spiritual* journey, the way we take up our cross to follow Jesus, especially *this* week, the holiest week of the Christian year. Today is Palm Sunday; next week is Easter; what is your journey going to look like between now and then? I want to encourage you – *strongly* encourage you – not to jump straight from the joy and excitement of Palm Sunday to the joy and excitement of Easter morning. Do not neglect two of the most important days in the Christian calendar, the ones that happen *between* this Sunday and next: Maundy Thursday – when we commemorate Christ’s final meal with his disciples, and share in his holy feast – and Good Friday – when we commemorate Christ’s death on the cross for us and our salvation, and reflect on what that *means*. If you show up on Easter Sunday to celebrate Christ’s resurrection, without having gone through the “way of suffering” that led up to his death, then you’re kind of missing the point.

It has often been my custom in the past to read the passion narrative, the account of Christ’s suffering and death, over the course of the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services. I am doing things a little differently this year, following the lead of many churches that read the passion narrative on Palm Sunday, sometimes called “Passion Sunday.” We are still going to recount the events (and the meaning) of Maundy Thursday on Thursday, and the events (and the meaning) of Good Friday on Friday, with time for reflection and awe. I hope to see you at those services. But today ... as we remember how the last week of Jesus’ life began ... let us also remember how it ended. I am going to read the passion narrative, beginning with that final meal, as Luke records it in his gospel. I invite you to sit back, and let the words of this story sink in. Let them penetrate your *soul*. And remember: he did this all ... *for you*.

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