

Walking distance from my house is a hiking trail called Shakerag Hollow. It is particularly known in the area for its spring beauty. Though only a few trees are budding, and the ground is still brown with the scattering of decaying leaves, everywhere you look you see small pops of color. Carolina Spring Beauty, Yellow Woodland Violets, Toothwort, Trout Lilies, and Dutchman's Breeches<sup>1</sup> (my personal favorite) are growing and beginning to bloom. They remind me of our readings from last week, where in the valley of dry bones and in Lazarus' tomb God brings life to something that is dead.

As Christians, this is the narrative that we are used to. That there will be death, but after death comes resurrection and life. We are Easter people after all, and we know the end of the story. We know that death and sorrow will not have the last word. And I think it is this knowing that makes Palm Sunday so difficult. Because instead of beginning with death and moving to resurrection, we begin with rejoicing and triumph and end in death. Take our psalms, for example. The first one that we read (Psalm 118) begins with the words "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His mercy endures forever." Which is quite the contrast to our later Psalm (31) that says "Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble; my eye is consumed with sorrow, and also my throat and my belly." We don't want to end

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<sup>1</sup> Flower names obtained from <https://sewaneherbarium.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/a-walk-through-the-hollow/>

with the sorrow and the trouble, we want to end with thanksgiving for the goodness of God. That is how the story is *supposed* to go.

I want to invite us all to sit in this frustration for a minute. Just like I asked the kids – how does it make your body feel? What is your tendency when you come up against dissonance like this? Do you dive in? Do you run away? Do you change the subject? (pause) There will be many times in our lives where we hit this frustration. Frustration at the difficulty of being human. Frustration that the joy didn't last. Frustration that things didn't go the way we had planned. Frustration that resurrection doesn't happen until death happens first.

It was sitting in this space of discomfort between the two readings that I realized something about the first gospel story for today. Jesus' ride into Jerusalem isn't a story of resurrection joy, but of earthly joy. And maybe not even that. Because, nowhere in the gospel does it say that Jesus took joy in this event. This journey into Jerusalem, particularly for the writer of Matthew, is about Jesus fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy of the Messiah being a "gentle king."<sup>2</sup> But worshiping a king is a very human desire. The people of Jerusalem would have looked up to and welcomed a king into their midst because kings have power and wealth – and we think that those things will bring us joy. We can see this peeking

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Jeannine K, *Commentary on Matthew*, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2021. Accessed on hoopla

through in the final line of the gospel where the people respond to Jesus' arrival with "who is this?" While some of those responses may be in awe, there are likely others who say the same words with a tone of "who does he think he is?" While many may have been happy to greet Jesus, there is no resurrection joy here. His entry into Jerusalem doesn't create any kind of real, deep joy; instead it creates discord and suspicion.

Today's stories don't form a reverse resurrection narrative, as it first appears. Rather, our dueling gospels show us a different progression. They show us how trying to find our hope and joy in power leads us only to death. How earthly power creates division and hurt rather than wholeness. How humanity can so quickly shift from shouting "hosanna" to "crucify him".

Today is the beginning of Holy Week, which means that we know the end of the story is coming. And remember, we *know* this story. We know that the death and pain that we read today will not have the final word. We know that the true hope and joy of resurrection is only a week away. But in the meantime. I invite us all to sit with the pain and the discomfort of Jesus' death. Ponder it, wrestle with it, live it this week. Let us question how our longings for power and certainty are leading us into spaces of death. Let us sit with the spaces of death in our lives that we have been clinging to because they remind us of a former joy.

When we sit in this grief, we open ourselves to walk alongside Jesus in his path to the cross. It is not an easy journey, because it is filled with physical and emotional pain. But Jesus has walked through this grief, and so we are never alone in ours. We can walk alongside him because we do know the end of the story and know that he won't leave us in this hurt forever. Thus, this week let us walk with Jesus, because when we do, we create space in our hearts for the true joy of Easter's resurrection.