

Let's face it—nothing else in the Church Year is as big as Holy Week and Easter! Nothing even comes close! First, there's Maundy Thursday; the day Jesus gives us His New Commandment—His mandate—to love one another like He loves us, wrapping a towel around His waist and washing His disciples' dirty feet. I mean, WOW! On a scale of 1-10, Maundy Thursday is like a 200. Then, there's Good Friday, when Jesus gets hung out to die, abandoned by everyone even God. It just blows you away! On a scale of 1-10, Good Friday's got to be at least a 250! And as for that Saturday—Holy Saturday—I don't know how to rank it, what with the silence of God, the broken hearts of Jesus' followers, then the Vigil. All I can say is, BIG STUFF! Finally, there's Easter, the highest and holiest day of them all! On a scale of 1-10, Easter is about a 300—okay, maybe 3,000; maybe 3 billion even! It's beyond our wildest expectations—the Son of God alive again, back from the dead! On a scale of 1-10, there's no scale big enough when it comes to the resurrection!

But today, Palm Sunday—the beginning of Holy Week—it's the day we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Now, how do we rank that? The preacher Mike Graves tells the story of when he served as interim minister at a church in Columbia, Missouri. It was a wonderful university town, Graves recalls, and a wonderful church. And every year that church—the whole town even—had a tradition. On Palm Sunday, all the downtown churches gathered together for a procession of palms. There were Presbyterians, and Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, even Lutherans—all gathered with palm branches in their hands. It was about 10:30 when they got started, with some people just having come from service and others on their way to one.

The whole thing took place on Broadway—that was the name of their main street through downtown. It's a typical main street in a college town—little sandwich shops, stores with University of Missouri merchandise, and of course, plenty of bars. It's the kind of street college kids would cruise up and down some Saturday night, or where Tigers fans might gather to celebrate the occasional, miraculous victory over Nebraska. But this was a Sunday morning celebration, not a Saturday night football game. Think of the contrast—just some Christians oddly waving palm branches in the streets for a few minutes, while the rest of the town slept. Crowd control was not an issue—things were pretty tame. Kind of like this morning in Atlanta. I don't know about you, but I didn't have to take a detour to get here because of a bunch of rowdy Christians in the streets somewhere—that's not the case at all.

Maybe, on a scale of 1 to 10, Palm Sunday is closer to a 1—yeah about a 1. There's nothing all that triumphant about Jesus' so-called Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. In fact, the designation "Triumphant Entry" isn't even in the Bible. Some Christian speakers might call it that, but Matthew never does. He doesn't call it anything—he just tells the story. And it's hardly the stuff of *Headline News*—probably wouldn't even make the little ticker tape that runs across the bottom of the screen. Along with thousands of other pilgrims streaming into Jerusalem for the Passover feast, it would be pretty easy to miss some random rabbi and a dozen of his followers wandering into the city. Not exactly the big deal it's sometimes made out to be.

Sure, there are a few "Hosannas" in the air—but many scholars agree that in Jesus' time what originally began as a cry for deliverance, "Save us now," had become sort of a half-hearted "Hurrah." In fact, in Matthew's version of the story there's no mention of palms. And as for Matthew saying that the "whole city" is stirred up, and that the crowds were shouting this and that, keep one thing in mind: Matthew's a preacher, and as you might know by now preachers like to exaggerate. Not me, of course . . . but some do. Matthew tries to make a big deal of it probably because he knows the story has a greater, deeper, even ironical ring to it theologically speaking. But as an historical event, as to what actually took place, it's a relatively small story—wouldn't make too many history books as far as the world's concerned.

Now, the St. Patrick's Day parade in Chicago, when they turn the river green—that's a big deal. Or Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade in New York City with all those giant inflatables—that's also up there. Or how about Mardi Gras in New Orleans—that definitely gets a high ranking. On a scale from 1 to 10, those are at least a solid 7 or an 8, if not a 10. But,

Matthew's entry narrative, isn't nearly as big—it's about a 1. If it wasn't on the Church's calendar every year, you might even blow by it when reading your Bible at home. *Hurrah*.

You see, the people in Jerusalem knew about triumphal entries. The ancient Mediterranean world was full of 'em—conquering armies with generals mounted on regal stallions, riding in to claim their spoils. Compare that scene to Jesus today, clip-clopping quietly on a donkey with just a few ragtag disciples. It's sort of embarrassing really for someone like the Son of God—anything but triumphant.

An Episcopal priest once told the story of when they were on a tour bus in Cairo. There they were, all these Americans with fat wallets, cameras around their necks, and bags full of souvenirs, sitting on this big air-conditioned bus. They were sitting at this traffic light, when out the window a large man was spied riding on top this tiny donkey. The donkey was galloping so much the man was bouncing up and down, barely able to keep balance. After witnessing such a spectacle, the priest said, "Trust me, it wasn't a triumphal entry." Apparently, it was more comical than anything—kinda like the account in Matthew's gospel. Unless . . . unless . . . we're missing something.

For those of you who don't know, I grew up just outside of Washington D.C.—Fairfax, Virginia, to be exact. My father was a retired Navy officer, then a contractor for the military, and many of the people we knew also worked for the government in some capacity. So, as you can imagine, the Independence Day parade in our nation's capital was nothing short of a big deal. And as a child, I can remember getting excited when my parents told me we'd be attending one year.

Well, July 4th came around, and as I rode in the back seat I could hardly contain myself as we crossed over the Key Bridge, going from Virginia into the District. My head was swimming with visions of military marches, a grand appearance by our Commander in Chief, and other flashy displays of pomp and circumstance. Finally, after what felt like an eternity to find parking, we were able to get out and make our way to the sidelines. Everyone was in their red, white, and blue—clapping, shouting, cheering. There was just this electricity in the air.

But as I made my way to the front of the crowd to see the action, what did I find? Tanks rolling down the street? Soldiers doing neat tricks with their guns? The leader of the free world waving from a shiny limo? No, one after another came various high school marching bands, gaudy floats for this or that club, maybe the most exciting thing that day was some dance team's choreographed routine. Kind of disappointing after everything I'd built up in my head. To be honest, this didn't even make the scale of 1 to 10—this was more like a negative 15.

Later on, I came to find out that we'd arrived too late for the good part. We'd missed a group of musicians dressed up in Revolutionary War garb and an Uncle Sam on stilts. That had already come through while we were looking for a parking space. Then, adding insult to injury, I later learned that we'd left before the big fireworks display over the National Mall. *What, come on!* I thought. *You've got to be kidding me!* We had gotten there too late, and left too early. We missed the beginning and skipped the big finish. No wonder it was a negative 15—had I seen the whole thing it would've easily been bumped up to at least a 7.

Maybe Palm Sunday's kinda like that. It's like showing up to the parade late and leaving early. At worst, Palm Sunday's just the less exciting middle of God's grand parade. Which means had we caught the beginning and were we to watch it through to the end, you and I'd probably give it a much higher ranking.

So, what have we missed? Well, if we had been following this parade all along, we would've caught God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ embarking on a long and arduous journey from heaven down to earth and back up to heaven again. At Christmastime, we would've seen Him touch down on our planet and set foot on our soil. He would've lit up the night sky with the whole host of heaven! He would've shattered the silence with an angel chorus breaking out into song! He would've brought world peace, announcing peace on earth and goodwill toward men! On a scale from 1 to 10, that first Christmas in Bethlehem would've been rated at least a 100!

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Palm Sunday
Matthew 21:1-9

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And after today, where is this parade going? That's for you to find out soon this Holy Week. Jesus will lead us to an upper room, where He'll choose to spend his last meal at table with us. He'll then invite us up to Mt. Calvary to witness the greatest love the world has ever known. And just when the parade seems to come to a screeching halt—cancelled on account of a death—Jesus will pick it back up again right where He left off by marching out of the tomb all new, all alive, all resurrected! Finally, the parade will take to the skies as He returns home on a note of triumph! On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you even begin to rank something like that?

So, here we are, Palm Sunday. We come to find out this parade has been going on way before and will keep going long after—today we're just catching the middle of it. But you and I are no mere spectators—as this parade comes through this morning, it refuses to just casually pass us by. From start to finish, after all, this whole thing is meant to catch you up into the arms of God as He pulls the whole world close. You see, this parade—it's all for you.

And as you feel its tug, get swept away. This parade's carrying you—all that you've been: your sin, your sadness, your regrets—toward Good Friday, nailing it all to a cross in the flesh of Jesus. Then from there, it yanks you through His death and out the other end—also all new, all alive, all resurrected—as you leave the tomb with Him Easter morning. Finally, as the Psalmist puts it, “[He] ascend[s] on high, leading a host of captives in [His] train”—*that's you!* (68:18a) He came in the first place to scoop you up and take you with Him! In the person of Jesus Christ, God has reached down to draw you up to Himself!

Now that you've seen where this parade has been and where it's going, you won't want to miss it. On a scale of 1 to 10, it's gonna be . . . well, they have yet to invent a number big enough!