

## WHO WAS MISSING?

Luke 19:28-40

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In the villages of Samaria, they're still talking about Jesus. The story of his conversation with the woman at the well has been told and re-told. That woman is a completely different person now. She used to hide. She'd only come out of her house when she thought no one else was around. She knew people talked about her and her reputation. She heard the names they called her and it filled her with shame. But then, she encountered Jesus. He looked her in the eyes, he talked with her about her life, he told her who he was. And when he left town, continuing his walking journey, she told everyone that she had met the Messiah. Even though no one liked her before, even though they shunned her and talked about her behind her back, she was so convincing that they believed what she said about Jesus. She's now a part of the community, she's accepted, and they're still talking about Jesus.

But no one from Samaria has come to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. The Samaritans don't worship in Jerusalem; they have their own holy place. Even though some of them are curious about Jesus, they haven't followed him, because while **he** might treat them ok, they don't trust his followers, nor do they trust the others who would be in Jerusalem that week. They don't want to be ostracized, kicked out. They stay where they feel they belong.

There's a family in Nazareth that planned to make the trip this year. They'd been saving for it, hoping to attend with all of their children who are now old enough to travel.

They want their children to see the temple and experience the holy days there. And they've heard that they might be able to see Jesus there - Jesus, their family friend. But just as they were beginning to pack their supplies for the week, their grandmother became sick. They don't want to leave her, so they're staying back in Nazareth. They'll try again next year.

It's not too far from Jericho to Jerusalem - most people could walk it in a day. And one older couple from Jericho had hoped to do so. They saw Jesus once, that time he stopped in their town and spoke to Zacchaeus. They live not far off the main road, and they watched it all from their front yard. They heard the crowds, they walked towards the road and heard Jesus approaching. They listened to Jesus' teaching, and then they saw Jesus look up, into the sycamore tree, and point out Zacchaeus. The crowd grew quiet then. They all wondered what Jesus would say to the hated tax collector, the one who worked for Rome, who gouged them every chance he could. They were stunned when Jesus spoke compassionately to Zacchaeus and they still can't believe he asked to spend the night in his home. Here's the most surprising result. Zacchaeus really changed. He stopped working for the Roman authorities. He's practically the town social worker now, seeking out the people who are in need and trying to find resources for them. There's no doubt about it; he's a new person. Everyone in Jericho seems changed by it, too. They're kinder to each other, their attendance at synagogue services is better. And more people are talking about making the trip to Jerusalem this year for the Passover. Rabbi Jesus has inspired them. But

this couple starts to have doubts. The husband's one knee is giving him problems, and it's a long journey. They decide they'd better stay home.

We know who **was** there, that first Palm Sunday. Historians tell us, from studies of documents found from that time period and from archeological research, that there were massive crowds in Jerusalem for the Passover. Inside the walled city there were thousands of pilgrims, tens of thousands of sacrifices, worshipers praying and singing and playing music. All this accompanied by shouts of exultation, more singing, and sounds of cooking, feasting, and laughing all with a view to remembering God's mercy for the Israelites in Egypt. It was, in part, a boisterous joyful celebration. Think downtown Cleveland after the Cavs won the NBA title. Everyone in the city was swept up in the emotion. We need those experiences of unmitigated joy.

Some of the people who were greeting Jesus at the gate to the city had been transformed by him. They had heard him speak and they'd never forgotten how his words made them feel. Some of them had felt his healing touch. And they were with him, all week. They were there on the Friday after the procession, even if they were cowering in fear. They observed the injustices of his trials. They watched him carry the cross in agony. They prayed for him even as they were so confused.

We also know that some people who were there on Sunday shouting "Hosanna" were the same ones on Friday shouting "Crucify Him!" They hadn't known him; they were just part of the crowd. People can be easily swayed, at any age, by peer pressure. We know this. We confess it.

Jerusalem was at that time a walled city. To enter it you walk through one of 8 gates. Jesus rides through one gate, surrounded by the enthusiastic crowd. Directly opposite, at another gate, stood Roman soldiers. Some scholars believe even Pilate himself was there, the Roman governor. The contrast between the two parades couldn't be more stark. Jesus comes in with a crowd, yes, but it's a ragtag crowd of commoners, pulling leaves off the branches of trees. He rides on a donkey, the most humble of animals. Pilate comes in with horses, chariots and gleaming armor. Pilate is there for two reasons. First, he's a politician who likes a crowd. And second, he's there to keep the peace. These are unsettled times. The people are tired of being oppressed and treated unfairly by Rome. Passover is the perfect time for those who want revolution to stir up the crowd. Activists are saying, "Remember your ancestors whom God delivered from the Pharaoh? God wants to deliver you too!" Pilate knows that there are insurrectionists everywhere, and he's heard of rabble rouser named Jesus, a trouble maker from Nazareth.

Jesus enters the city. He knows what's going on. He's been telling his disciples all along that his life is in danger. He's made too many enemies. The religious authorities are suspicious of him because he looks at the law differently than they do. The political authorities are threatened by his popularity.

We walk into this Holy Week with him, and we know what's going on, too. We've read this script every year, we've heard these stories, we know the lines. Still, this story has the power to move us because the story of this week is the story of human life.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus experiences the thrill of popularity - on this one day, no one is criticizing him - at least no one in earshot. Everywhere he looks people are on the Jesus bandwagon.

In Jerusalem this week, Jesus will express anger when he sees the corruption at the temple. In his only real display of temper, he will overturn the tables of the money-changers. His anger is not out of control, but directed at those who are taking advantage of the poor.

On Thursday he will be betrayed by a close friend, his other friends will fall asleep even though he asks them to stay awake. He will experience profound disappointment. In a most human moment, he will ask God, "Please, is there any way that these events can be altered?" Jesus doesn't want to suffer, isn't ready to die, yet knows that obedience to God is the way of life he has chosen. All that he has done in the previous three years - all of the messages he's given about compassion and justice - none of them will matter if he runs away.

He could have. He could have slipped out of the Garden of Gethsemane while everyone was sleeping; he could have hidden out in the desert for the rest of his life. But then nothing he said or did would have been remembered. He chooses obedience instead.

We know about betrayal, we have felt righteous anger, we know disappointment. This is the human condition. We also know what happens on Friday - Jesus is the victim of an unjust legal system, he faces public humiliation. He can't see a friendly face anywhere. Instead, angry voices are shouting, "Crucify him!" He will experience

torture, pain and an agonizing death. The English word, “excruciating” comes from the experience of dying on a cross.

Because of this week, we are not alone in our human experience. When we feel the pain of betrayal, physical suffering, loneliness, criticism - any of it - we can remember the story of Holy Week and know that God knows what human life is like. God is with us. Emmanuel. God is with us in all of our humanity.

Along with other church staff and leaders - and many church members - I have been spending time thinking about, praying about, and reaching out to those who are missing from our congregation. It’s something I did before the pandemic, too - for it’s always been the case that people can drift away from a community. But the situation is more poignant now. I pore over our membership lists and wonder about those people I haven’t seen or heard from. I wonder if they’re ok. I wonder if they need anything. I hope they know they can reach out to us. I pray for them. Our congregation is not the same without them.

And I wonder, too, about who else is missing...who are the people in our communities who aren’t here? I know there are people who wish they had a place to belong, a place where they would be welcome even if they’ve never been a part of a church before, even if they have more doubts and questions than anything else, even if they’ve been rejected by other churches.

The message of Jesus spread because of what happened in Jerusalem on this Holy Week. It spread to Samaria, where there is still a tiny Christian community. It spread to Nazareth where a family gathered around the grandmother’s bedside as she

took her last breath. It spread to Jericho where an older couple heard, many weeks later, about Jesus. "He isn't really dead!" someone told them, and they somehow believed. To all of the people who were missing from Jerusalem that week, the news began to spread - of a God who is with them, in all of their raw humanity, in the bitter and in the sweet.

And that God is with us too. With the family who is not here today because they're still too worried about their child's mental health crisis. With the woman who is staying home today, feeling embarrassed about her ongoing struggles with sobriety. With the couple who recently separated - neither of them knowing if they can face church and the questions someone might ask. God is with us - with the unemployed, with the person who just dropped out of school, with the anxious, with the grieving. And God is with the family leaving in a few days on a long-awaited vacation, bags packed, tickets checked and re-checked. When we're on top of the world and when we can barely put one foot in front of the other, God is with us. The story of Jesus is our story. The good news that Holy Week ushers in is for all people, wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever their life circumstances. Thanks be to God.