"AND NOW YOU KNOW THE REST OF THE STORY"
Rev. Don Rollins
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Holy Week: Low Church and "No" Church

The first year, they were puzzled that I wouldn't be participating in any Holy Week services. The second year, they were Minnesota nice enough to act as though I simply hadn't heard them correctly the year before – *would I like to participate in any Holy Week services*? Last year, there was that clever subterfuge floated by one of the Lutheran pastors: perhaps I might like to *share* a Holy Week service? This year? This year, when Holy Week came up on the agenda, they barely looked up as I excused myself, and then sprinted from the building like an escaped convict on crack.

For as long as I can remember, Holy Week has been spiritual kryptonite for me. In my boy-wonder, evangelical preacher days, my denomination was on the low end of low-church liturgy: Palm Sunday and Good Friday were just the under-cards for the main event. Nobody I knew fussed with Advent or Lent. Nobody worried about changing the pulpit and altar tapestries to match the liturgical calendar. The Lord's Supper and baptism were the only sacraments, Christmas and Easter, the only holy days. The rest of that stuff was for the heathen Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists.

Having made the long and curvy journey to Unitarian Universalism, I still didn't care much for Holy Week; once biblical scholarship, reason and life experiences stripped away the thick bark of my faith and supernatural finger-crossing, what remained was a patched-together story about a rabble-rouser who was murdered because he had a gift for alienating as many Romans as Jews. Seen from my new (and radically different) theological perch, Holy Week still held little meaning for me. I couldn't ignore the fact that messianic predictions from the Hebrew Bible were lifted and patched into the Gospels as a marketing tool for swaying skeptical Jews. I could no longer read the Christian texts without factoring for the history, culture, context and languages unique to First-Century Israel under Roman occupation. I couldn't suspend human reason and natural law. And neither could I adopt what seemed to me to be the half-measure stance of most of my fellow seminarians: the risen Christ as the lens into the love of God, and thus a prelude to redemptive living.

None of these could I do and feel true to myself.

So, Holy Week was no big deal back in the days when the risen Christ was the centerpiece of my theology, and that didn't change once its biblical underpinnings became dry rotted. And that's why my New Ulm Ministerium colleagues barely noticed when I snarfed up my date book and notepad last month.

It's not as though I'm the only religious liberal to have this aversion to Holy Week.
For even the more liturgical among us, the notion of the literally risen Jesus is just not palatable. So why mess with Holy Week if it can no longer be read as a literal account of Jesus' life leading up to his death? And what use is half-measure, metaphorical redemption

if we're no longer, as Jonathon Edwards famously said, sinners in the hands of an angry God?

PALM SUNDAY

Today, as always, converts to Unitarian Universalism come from all over the religious and non-religious spectrum, bringing with them their values, rituals and stories. For those of us who came from low-church Christianity – often as not, people whose church culture was *oral* – it's the biblical stories that we bring with us. You've got your Garden of Eden, your Noah's Ark, your Burning Bush and your Ten Commandments. Joseph knew the value of a sharp jacket. Lot's wife looked back and became a pile of sodium chloride. David whooped Goliath. The Hebrew children turned out to be fireproof. Samson got a haircut. Job got sick and had lousy friends.

And that's just the Hebrew Bible. The Christian scriptures are chock-full of stories, too. Mary gets pregnant, Joseph gets surprised and Jesus gets incarnated. The child prodigy goes Old School on the temple rabbis, interpreting the ancient scriptures in ways they'd never considered. John the Baptist, half-wild and not a little bit crazy, baptizes and introduces us to the adult Messiah. The Devil goes three rounds with Jesus (no guffawing, "South Park" fans) and loses. And the itinerant rabbi turns the Law every which way but loose, eating with commoners, defending women, breaking Sabbath, throwing down with the Pharisees and likening their temple to a white-washed tomb.

And then there's the story – *stories*, actually – of Jesus' last week, Holy Week. With the help of a contemporary scholar, let's see if perhaps those days are worth a little liberal religious "rethinking".

You may have heard of the Jesus Seminar. Begun in 1985 for the purpose of making the best *educated* guesses about who Jesus was and what he said, they still meet twice a year to update their work. One of the original members of the Jesus Seminar, Marcus Borg, lays out the most credible current version of what happened in the days leading up to Easter. Keeping in mind that Borg is a religious liberal and Christian – and thus reads the Bible metaphorically, not literally – let's see what he has to tell us about Holy Week:

The final week of Jesus' life was filled with a series of dramatic actions, confrontations and events, all flowing from his involvement in his people's direction and future.

Luke lovingly depicts Jesus' concern about Jerusalem and the future of the nation in his portrait of Jesus and his followers arriving on the ridge of the Mount of Olives, which overlooks Jerusalem from the east. There, we are told, Jesus looked out over the city and grieved for its inhabitants because of what he could see about their future and they could not: the threat of war, their city surrounded by enemies, then conquered and destroyed.

...Like Jeremiah before him, he wept about his people's future, feeling the grief of God about what would happen because of their blindness. "Would that even today you knew

the things that make for peace," he exclaimed; "But they are hid from your eyes." Not knowing the things that made for peace, they faced a future of destruction.

So far, Marcus Borg is telling us that Jesus had a clear sense of the politics and military might of his day, placing him squarely in the line of Hebrew prophets. Why is this important? Because to treat Holy Week as a religious, historical or even theological event is to miss the *human event – the* grieving prophet, Jesus, who is nobody's naïve, gentle lamb-before-the-slaughter. (When we wrench the story of Holy Week out of its proper context, it diminishes the human Jesus and gives license to shape him into a tamed, emasculated deity on his way to a martyr's destiny.)

Estimates of Jerusalem's population at the time range between forty and seventy thousand. The occupying Roman army had been reinforced for Passover, for that most Jewish of occupied territory was known to swell to twice that size for major religious festivals.

As Borg tells it, the Roman reinforcements were marching into the city from the west, perhaps even as Jesus was riding a donkey's colt from the east. Why all the specificity about the colt? Again, the answer is political. Jesus knew the Hebrew scriptures well. He had most certainly identified with the major prophets over the course of the previous three years, and thus was familiar with the prophet Zechariah's account of the new Jewish king riding into Jerusalem "on a colt, the foal of an ass." As Borg sees it,

He was not mechanically fulfilling a prophecy; rather, he chose a known symbol from his tradition in order to say that the kingdom of which he spoke was a kingdom of peace, not of war. If the language is not too modern, his entry was a planned political demonstration, and appeal for Jerusalem to follow the path of peace, even as it proclaimed that his movement was the peace party in a generation headed to war.

So what does Jesus do when he enters the city's center? He goes to the temple, a relatively small building that scholars tell us was seen by the Jews as a sacred place, the place where one encounters God in an intimate way. It was petitioned off so as to allow Jewish men to worship in an inner court, ringed by those for Jewish women, peddlers of sacrificial animals and, lastly, non-Jews.
There were moneychangers – observant Jewish men who sold special "holy" coins that did not bear the image of any secular figure – who had managed to monopolize the market and increase the exchange rate. The "holy coins" were the only acceptable means to buy sacrificial birds. Thus, as prices rose, poor Jews were forced to decide between proper worship and life's necessities.

Borg tells us that Jesus was once again drawing from the prophetic Hebrew tradition when he yelled the words, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it into a 'den of robbers'". According to the story, Jesus overturned tables. Jesus came un-taped and made a spectacle in front of Jews – his people. He scolded the temple priests and community leaders with a story about vineyards in which the owners mistreat their workers. Jesus was fit to be tied.

These two events, the politically motivated entrance to Jerusalem and the angry scene in the temple, are not exactly what most of us grew up associating with Palm Sunday.

MONDAY, TUESDAY AND WEDNESDAY

That's one eventful Sunday. Although it's less clear, all indications are that Jesus spent Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday on a mini-speaking tour of greater Jerusalem. It was Passover. Lots of pilgrims. Large crowds. Probably lots of supporters and a fair number for whom Jesus was a celebrity and a curiosity.

The two religious groups that took the brunt of Jesus' wrath, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were less enthused about his three-day tour. Jesus talked about paying taxes to the Romans as well as to the temple. He scorned the aristocrats for ignoring the city's poor. Speaking of Jesus' time between Sunday and Thursday, Borg tells us that:

...Jesus was primarily a prophet and radical teacher calling his people to change. No healings are reported...Rather, as the voice of an alternative consciousness, he called the enculturated consciousness of the day to return to God, even as it became more apparent that the outcome would be his death.

Busy, stressful days. Come nightfall on Wednesday, Jesus gathered the disciples and other followers to a valley just outside the city.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

The word Maundy has a Latin root, *mandatum*. It's derived from the Gospels' reference to the Great Commandment: "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you." He goes on to say that his life's work has been to signal a new covenant, one that is for both Jew and Gentile, and is written on the *heart*, not the sacred scrolls. If the Disciples had not
understood prior to that Thursday night the radical nature of their rabbi's teachings, they did thereafter. This was a king like no other.

The Thursday before Easter is commemorated for four events. First, in a ritual that signaled hospitality and humility, Jesus washed the feet of each of the Disciples. Next, the traditional Passover meal was altered so as to include a farewell from Jesus to the twelve – words that molded today's Holy Communion.
Third, following the Seder meal, there is the heart wrenching account of Jesus' withdrawal to Gethsemane, a small garden outside Jerusalem, where even his closest followers fall asleep, leaving him to pray alone. Lastly, Judas Iscariot slips away from the group in order to tell Jerusalem's Jewish authorities that the troublemaker, Jesus, is alone. Maundy Thursday is central to the biblical plot.

GOOD FRIDAY

And so, not long after the sun came up on Friday morning, the man some called "King of the Jews" had been taken into custody, arrested, tried and found guilty on the charge of blasphemy. The only question that remained was whether or not the Roman governor,

Pilate, would consider Jesus to be the menace to society that he was to Judaism. Was Jesus guilty of treason as well as breaking temple law?

Pilate wavered, but politics was politics then, too; he saw in the situation the chance to gain favor with an opposing political force.

Jesus was found guilty. He was made to help carry up the hill the instrument of his death. He was stripped. He was beaten. He was hung between two convicted thieves. He was mocked. And he died a brutal death.

At least two things are worth noting about the death of Jesus of Nazareth. The first has to do with how it was that Jesus was transformed from mortal hero to divine savior. The second touches on a longstanding, controversial question: Who was responsible for killing Jesus? Borg helps us here:

...For the early church, looking back on the death of Jesus in the light of what happened afterward [the destruction of the very center of Judaism] it seemed clear that his death was foreordained, part of the "plan of God" from the beginning. For them, the death of Jesus was the death of the righteous sufferer, of the Servant of God who gave his life for the many, of God's only son who had been sent into the world for this purpose. Accordingly, the accounts of his death were interwoven with echoes and citations of the Old Testament, which helped make the point.

Moreover, for the early Christians looking back on the story, the cause of Jesus' death was ultimately the Jewish leadership's refusal to recognize him as the Son of God. So, the story of his "trial" before the Jewish high priest is told. Thus, despite the fact that Jesus' mode of death reflects a Roman execution, the stories of his death emphasized Jewish responsibility...From what we know about Roman policy in Palestine and Pilate's character in particular,
it is completely conceivable that the Romans alone were responsible for the entire scenario of the arrest, trial and execution.

But not so fast, says Borg. Yes, he suggests that while a totally Roman plot was *possible*, but he doesn't think it's *likely*:

...In all probability, there was a collaboration on the part of a small circle of Jewish leaders centered around the high priest...Appointed by Rome and accountable to the Roman governor, he was responsible for maintaining order in Palestine; upon his success at the task, his position depended. Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Jesus, held his position for the unusually long period of eighteen years, including the entire ten years of Pilate's governorship, suggesting that he was very good at working with the Romans. To assist him in his responsibility, the high priest appointed his own "privy council" who functioned as his political advisors, and who, like him, came from the aristocracy and high priestly families. The story of the "Jewish trial" of Jesus was probably a preliminary hearing before this "political Sanhedrin" rather than before the religious council. It is likely that they were alarmed at Jesus' dramatic actions that week in Jerusalem, took the steps which culminated in his arrest, then handed him over to Pilate for trial as a political claimant.

Let's be clear. Marcus Borg is well within the norm of modern biblical scholarship when he says that the early Christians were eager to blame any Jew who did not believe Jesus to be the promised Messiah, thus the Gospels were written with that extreme bias; it makes literal interpretation of the Bible not just implausible, but *dangerous* in cases like this. (Little wonder some two centuries later, Hitler could point to the Bible and convince people that it was "the Jews" who killed Jesus.)

But, as I mentioned earlier, Borg wants us to put the death of Jesus in its *human* context:

It is easy to think of them [the Jews and Romans] *as especially villainous, given our perception of Jesus' innocence, goodness and identity. Yet they were not, or at least there's no reason to think so. They were the established order of their society, standing at the top of their social world politically, economically and religiously. Their place in society not only gave them the responsibility for maintaining order, but also affected how they saw things.*

No sane human being in this age can appreciate the relatively casual way in which death, even by crucifixion, was treated. Jesus was by no means the first activist to gain a Jewish following, make it to the radar screen of both the religious and secular authorities, and be condemned to death by crucifixion. And he was by no means the last. So here's the bottom line: The truly remarkable feature of the death of Jesus of Nazareth is not his message, his followers, his disfavor with the temple or the Romans or the savagery of death by crucifixion; the truly remarkable feature of his death is that, after two millennia, we know anything at all about it. By every measure, Jesus should be little more than a footnote about yet another Jewish prophet, a religious and political reformer that expected to die as the price for his message. Period. Yet here we are.

EASTER SUNDAY

Easter Sunday cannot be properly understood apart from Holy Week. With the help of some two hundred years of scholarship, not only can religious liberals debunk the popular version of the last week of Jesus' life, so, too, can we be discerning enough to give his story its rightful due, better understand him and even *learn* from him.

Then again, some among us never stopped learning from him. Some, like me, brought Jesus with us as we brought the stories that continue to challenge and inspire us. We could no more leave him behind than we could remain in the traditions that introduced him to us.

I'll close with Clinton Lee Scott's familiar poem, "Easter":

Jesus is risen from the dead.
The centuries have not been able to bury him.

Forsaken by his friends,
sentenced to die with thieves,
his mangled body in a borrowed tomb,
he has risen to command the hearts of millions, and
to haunt our hate-filled world

with the relentlessness of undying hopes.

The years bring him increasingly to life.
The imperial forces that tried to destroy him
have long ago destroyed themselves.
Those who passed judgment upon him
are remembered only because of him.

Military and political tyranny
still stalk the earth;
they, too, will perish,
while the majesty of the carpenter-prophet
bearing his cross to the hill
will remain to rebuke
the ways of violence.