

HOPE

Luke 19:28-40

(Based on a sermon by Fred Craddock, A Fred Craddock Collection, Tape 22B.

Also used, Luke For Everyone by Tom Wright.)

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Fred Craddock says that he has a friend in Emporia, Kansas, who calls Palm Sunday “False Easter.” The man, of course, is borrowing from what many people call “false spring.” You understand that concept, don’t you?

Where I grew up, it went something like this: You would have several warm days in a row. The peach trees would blossom. The apple trees would bud. The owner of the orchard would wring his hands because spring had come too early. The trees were responding as if spring had already sprung. It wasn’t really spring. It was a false spring, for a cold snap was sure to follow. They would try to save their orchards, but the buds would freeze – turn brown and fall off. With each flower that falls, so falls a peach or an apple.

I remember watching on the news as a child as they interviewed the orchard owners who were trying to brace themselves for the cold of the night and trying in some way to heat up their orchards to save the peaches, to save the apples, to save their livelihood for the entire year. False spring had threatened all that they owned.

I tend to respond too quickly. The stores put out the spring flowers way before it’s springtime in Amarillo. People run and try to get ahead of their neighbors – be the first one to set out the geraniums. You wait until after Mother’s Day, a time that seems safe to set out the bedding plants, and there aren’t any bedding plants left to pick from. So you set them out early and – snap – the cold comes. You can bring in the pots, but you can’t bring in the flowers planted in the yard. So you try to cover them up. You save some, and you lose some.

False spring has its own sting. It looks like it’s going to be one thing – warm weather, summer approaching. It turns out to be another – a chilly night, even below freezing. A blue norther blows in, and the begonias blow out.

The robin runs across your lawn, looking for worms. You put away the warm jackets and the gloves. “Won’t need these anymore.” But you’re wrong. Really wrong. The robins are gone. You bring in the pets. And you go looking for the hat and gloves you tucked away until next year. Because it wasn’t really spring. It was false spring.

Like so, Fred Craddock’s friend calls Palm Sunday “False Easter.”

I see his point. It is like Easter for a while. We gather together, and we all shout, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna to the highest.” We celebrate as if Jesus has arrived to set up His kingdom. Then we have Lord’s Supper on Thursday or Friday, and things are dark again.

It wasn’t really Easter on Palm Sunday. It was false Easter. The joy didn’t last any more than the blooms on the peach trees or the robins running across the lawn, for Friday is around the corner. Jesus is betrayed by a friend. The rest desert Him. Abandon Him. His private place of prayer is shattered by the soldiers. “You’re under arrest,” they shout. The word spreads over the city that Jesus has been taken.

And He’s crucified.

Cover your plants. Bring in the pets. It’s not Easter.

Like the warm day marching in, the pilgrims made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. There they were – the throngs, marching to Jerusalem, marching to Zion.

Mile after mile uphill. They wind up through the sandy hills from Jericho, the lowest point on the face of the earth, through the Judaeen desert, climbing all the way. Halfway up, you reach sea level; you’ve already climbed the long way from the Jordan valley, and you still have to ascend a fair-sized mountain. It’s almost always hot; since it seldom, if ever, rains, it’s almost always dusty as well.

That was the way these pilgrims came. And Jesus is going on in front of them. See Him there, marching, as He had planned all along. This was going to be the climax of His story, of His public career, of His vocation. He knew well enough what lay ahead, and had set His face to go and meet it head on. He couldn’t stop announcing the kingdom, but that announcement could only come true if He now embodied in Himself the things He had been talking about. He was bringing not this Passover, but the real Passover of which the Exodus is only symbolic. This was God’s great Passover. The wrath of God would pass over those who had been marked by the blood of the real Lamb, by the blood of His Son.

At Passover time, at the height of spring, we crest the summit. There before you, glistening in the sun, is the holy city, Jerusalem itself, on its own, slightly smaller hill across a narrow, but deep, valley. Where are the pilgrims going? At the end of this journey, the pilgrimage to end all pilgrimages, Passover time in the holy city of God. But this Passover in their eyes was like none other. For they were escorting in the long-awaited Messiah.

Zechariah 9:9 said the Messiah would ride on a young donkey that had never been used before. The disciples pick up the theme. In a kind of instant royal celebration they spread cloaks along the road for Him. Down they go, down the steep path to the Kidron Valley. The crowd starts to sing part of the great psalm of praise, Psalm 118. “Hosanna. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

[In their eyes], He comes with national hopes. He comes to fulfill all that they had been waiting for. He comes for their liberation – they think, at least from Roman oppression. (Tom Wright, *Luke For Everyone*, p. 228, modified)

The Messiah. The long-awaited Messiah. Spring is here. Easter has arrived.

As Craddock notes, it's what they've been saying all their lives. "When the Messiah comes...." They would see a cripple on the street. "I wish I could help you brother, but when the Messiah comes, there will be no cripples." They say to the house where the children are hungry, "I wish we could help you, but when the Messiah comes, everybody will be well-fed." They say it to the couple married fourteen years and still rocking an empty cradle. "We feel really bad for you, but when the Messiah comes, every house will be filled with laughing children." To the girl assaulted by the Roman soldier, "Now dear, I know, I know. But when the Messiah comes, no violence."

That's what they've been saying all their lives. "When the Messiah comes...." And now He's here. Jesus is here.

Do you have the courage to tell them that what they've been expecting is not going to happen (see 18:31-34)? You know it. You know the end of the story. You know the Romans are not going to be overthrown. You know he's going to a cross instead of to a throne. You know he's going to be arrested – you've already read it. Now are you going to stop the story and tell them that this is not real spring – it's false spring? Not real Easter – but false Easter. Do you have the courage to break their hope?

Or you pass by Mrs. Farrow's house. She's on the porch. She's elderly. She has three grandchildren she's caring for. Her daughter disappeared. Her son-in-law never showed. But she has the children. She's poor – poor as Job's turkey. Has a little check comes once a month.

She's on the porch and the radio is on. "Mrs. Farrow, what are you doing? Listening to some good music?"

"No, I'm waiting until they broadcast the numbers of who won the groceries."

"What are you talking about?"

"The Piggly Wiggly is giving away \$100 worth of groceries. I have a ticket. And they're going to broadcast the winner at 12 o'clock. And I've been praying all week that I'd win the groceries. I told my grandchildren, 'You can bring your friends tonight for supper. We're going to have a feast.' You know, they've never been able to bring their friends for supper. But tonight – the winning ticket."

I dare you. Go up on that porch and tell Mrs. Farrow, "Mrs. Farrow, do you have any idea your chances of winning? Why, you have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than winning \$100 worth of free groceries from the Piggly Wiggly." Are you going to tell her that? I'm not going to tell her that.

What about Jesus? Should He turn around and say, “Hey, I appreciate your support, but the truth is that I’ll be dead on Friday.” Should He let them down easy? He doesn’t have to be harsh or cruel, but gently tell them they are on the wrong track. This is not the way it’s going to be. You’ve imagined spring all wrong and too early.

It reminds me of the story of a lady who went to Europe. She called back home to see how things were going. Her husband answered the phone, and she inquired about almost everything and everyone – especially about her prized Persian cat, Fifi. “How’s Fifi doing, my love?” the wife inquired.

“She’s dead; she fell off the roof.” the man replied.

The lady just dropped the phone. She said it would ruin the rest of her trip that he had told her about Fifi’s death and that he had told her in that way. (You know, I have found that sometimes people shoot the messenger for the message.)

“What should I have told you?” he asked. “I was just honest with you. You asked how Fifi was doing.”

“Well, you should have brought me down gently. You could have started by saying something like ‘Fifi is stuck on the rooftop.’ When I called back the next day, you could have said that Fifi had fallen off the rooftop and she was receiving the best of veterinary care and we were hoping against hope. On the third day you could have told me she had died.”

“I see,” said the man. “I’m very sorry. I just thought you’d want to know.”

A few days later, the lady called to check on everything again. She asked about her mother.

“Well, let’s just say,” the husband continued, “your mother is up on the rooftop.”

There is a way to break it softly to people. How are you going to tell these people that the Messiah has not ushered in the kingdom – at least, He’s not ushered it in in the way that they have imagined it should be.

In the book, *The Education of Little Tree*, there is a story about a poor man in the mountains of North Carolina. He had a little cabin with kids. His kids were on the back steps. They have an old Sears Roebuck catalog, and they are looking at it. They call it the “Wish Book.” They’re looking at things – red wagons and other toys, nice clothes. They’re just taking turns wishing.

Their father comes up and says, “What are you kids doing?” “We’re just wishing.” He grabs the book, tears it, and takes a switch and switches their legs. “Get in the house.”

“What did you do that for?”

“Well, they shouldn’t be wishing.”

“It doesn’t hurt to wish.”

“Well, it does too. The switching I gave them is nothing compared to wishing for what you will never, ever get.”

Is this just another messianic parade? Messiahs have come and gone in the past. You know what happens after the parade. The people trampling on the palm branches, saying, “Maybe next time. Maybe next time.”

People always want to shape their Messiah, their deliverer, like a potter shaping the clay.

We always want to shape our Messiah. To place expectations upon him. And the Jews always wanted to shape their own Messiah. That was the trouble with them. He told them, time and time again, that He was going to be delivered into the hands of the chief priest. He’s going to suffer, die under Pontius Pilate, and that He was going to rise again.

“Shhh. Don’t say that. We’ll never let that happen to you,” the others chimed in with Peter.

The parade is taking place. And in some ways it is false Easter, because the people are not going to get what they expect. They are ready to throw their cloaks and wave their palm branches on the road in front of Him – to do the showy and the flamboyant thing. But are they also willing to follow Him to the cross? To controversy? To trial and death?

I think not. They flee.

So what have you been trying to make out of Jesus? Who do you want Him to be for you? From what shall He deliver you?

Hosanna! Now that Messiah is here, my brother will be healed of cancer.

Now that Messiah is here, we’re sure to have a baby.

Now that Messiah is on my side, I’ll get a spot on the varsity football team.

Now that Messiah is here, I’ll miss the layoffs.

I hear it all the time from people. They line up in the parade for Palm Sunday, cheering Jesus on – until they realize, until they realize that, as far as they have perceived things, it’s a false Easter. A false spring.

Or is it really?

Some years ago, the Jewish community in Oklahoma City announced and advertised a contest among the schools of Oklahoma City for all who wanted to participate in the contest. There would be a prize and recognition award and articles in the paper and all of that for the winner. The contest

was this: Any young person in the schools could enter by drawing a picture entitled, “The Holocaust.” The only requirement was that it be realistic.

Fred Craddock’s grandson, Nathan, entered. He was fifteen or sixteen. He won. His was just a pencil drawing – black and white, nothing really unusual. Mostly it was a wall, a stone wall – gray, old, cold stone wall. But in a crack between two of the stones, Nathan drew a candle. And he won. The Holocaust.

This piddling little parade of Jesus. Tell them to put out the candle and go home.

No. No. Jesus said, “No. I’ll always have a witness. I tell you: If these become silent, the stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40).

Cry out what? Though it’s not ever as we would have imagined, He is the Messiah, the Son of God. He refuses to bend and mold His ministries to our expectations. He does the ultimate thing. In dying, He is victorious – the last way we’d have ever thought for Him to claim victory. And in His death, we live. And in the darkness of Good Friday, we have the light of Easter morning.

Put out the candle? Never. For real Easter is sure to arrive. He will arise!