

## When Easter Comes Late, Part 1

1/2 Series

Matthew 27:45-61

Palm/Passion Sunday

04 17 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

### Scripture: Matthew 27

### Easter Is Late This Year

Does Easter seem really late to you this year? There's a good reason for this. **Easter IS really late this year!** In fact, it's just about as late as it can come.

Easter and the holy days related to it are known as "*movable feasts*" in the Christian calendar. This simply means that they fall on a different dates each year. It can become quite confusing.

The date of Easter is determined by the **lunisolar calendar**. Easter is the first Sunday after the Paschal full moon—and everyone KNOW when that is! ☺ The tables that scientists use to determine the precise date can be found in *The Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Ephemeris and American Ephemeris and Nautical Almanac*! Seriously—I couldn't make this stuff up!

The bottom line is that Easter can fall on 35 possible dates from March 22 to April 25 inclusive. The last time it occurred on the latest date of April 25 was 1943; and the next time will be 2038. This year Easter is on April 24—just one day short of the final possible date.

Easter IS really late this year. I've heard and repeated this statement countless times over the past months. The sentence has continued to circle around my mind while planning worship this spring. It became a seed that grew into a two part sermon series which is entitled: *When Easter Comes Late*.

### Holy Week

A week from now we will celebrate the good news of the Resurrection. However, this Sunday BEFORE Easter is known as **Palm/Passion Sunday**. Frankly, it is an odd day in the church year. It bears the twin titles of **Palm AND Passion** Sunday. Today our worship service holds these two realities in tension.

**Palm Sunday** recalls Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The crowds greeted him like a conquering king. They shouted *Hosannas* as they waved palm branches in the air and placed coats on the road. The first part of our worship service today has been designed to recall the joyful celebration. It's a cheerful, celebratory remembrance.

**Passion Sunday** points to a very different reality. In Christian theology, "*the passion of Christ*" refers to Jesus' final hours of suffering, crucifixion, and death. The second half of our worship service today has reflected this brutal reality. It is much more somber and reflective.

In this two scenes from the movie, *The Gospel of John*, we see the stark contrast between Palm Sunday and Christ's Passion.

**DVD *The Gospel of John (2 Hour Version)***

Begin: 1:11:35	End: 1:12:36	Fade to black
Begin 1:42:07	End: 1:42:53	Fade to black

Palm/Passion Sunday is the first day of ***Holy Week*** which rehearses Jesus' final days on earth that he spent in Jerusalem. On Holy Thursday, we will remember Christ's Last Supper with the disciples as we participate in Holy Communion. On Good Friday, we will gather in worship at noon to recall Christ's crucifixion. Jesus of Nazareth: crucified, dead, and buried. And then we will wait . . . wait for the dawn of Easter Sunday morning.

My father had a habit that drove me crazy as a child. He would read the last few pages of a novel FIRST. When asked why, he would respond: "I don't want to waste my time reading a book if I don't like how it ends!" Of course, once you know how it ends, then why read it at all?

Some people ask the question: "Why bother with Holy Week?" We already KNOW how the story ends. Do we really need to pretend that we don't?

The story ends—and begins again—on Easter morning. Next Sunday we will celebrate the good news that "*Christ is risen, Christ is risen, indeed.*" It would make a certain amount of sense to just skip ahead. Then we could avoid the gory, graphic details of how Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, dead, and buried.

And quite honestly, the majority of Christians do just that. A minority of our church members will attend any worship services this week. Most people skip from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, from palm branches to Easter lilies, from parade to celebration.

So why bother with Holy Week? Let me give you the typical preacher's response first. It is important for us to hear the message of Christ's suffering and death repeatedly. We need to hear the old, old story with new ears for the first time all over again. The Passion vividly reveals the height, width, and depth of God's love, mercy, and grace. We stand at the foot of the cross in wonder and amazement of what God has done for us:

- ❖ "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*"
- ❖ "*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*"
- ❖ "*This proves God's love toward us: in the name of Jesus Christ you are forgiven!*"

However, there is a second reason why it is important for us to experience the events of Holy Week. In human terms, this is often where we find ourselves living. Yes, we are an Easter people who already anticipate next Sunday's celebration. There are times in life, however, **when Easter comes late**. We experience the heartache, grief, and pain of this fallen world. We need to walk with Christ during his final days to recall and reclaim that Christ walks with us during our earthly days.

**Twixt and Tween**

Matthew, Mark and Luke all agreed that the central element of Jesus' preaching and teaching was the **kingdom of God** or the **kingdom of heaven**. (John referred to this same reality in a different way when he talked about **eternal life**.) Mark put it this way: *"Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come' he said, 'the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.'"* (Mark 1:14-15)

The kingdom of God is NEAR. God's kingdom has a "**here but not yet**" quality about it. At times, Jesus referred to it as a present reality. At other times, he spoke about it as a future promise. If the kingdom of heaven was a verb, then we could conjugate it into three different tenses: God's kingdom has come, is coming, and will come. All three of realities of past, present, and future are present in Christ's teaching.

The word "**kingdom**" make us think of a physical place—a realm where God rules forever. And we do believe that one day the Almighty will bring history to a close and establish a new heaven and a new earth.

However, the kingdom continues to break in all about us. Another word we could use for "kingdom" would be "**kingship**." Rather than "**realm**" think of "**rule**." In other words, God's kingdom breaks into our world whenever we allow the Holy Spirit to rule in our lives.

So we live with this tension of "here but not yet." It has almost arrived but not quite. We see glimpses, hear echoes, and experience moments of heaven's realm and rule; but not in its fullness. To borrow Paul's words: *"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see fact to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."* (1 Corinthians 13:12)

Here and now we live between the two realities of heaven and earth. Or to use an old Southern expression, we live "**twixt and 'tween**." This is a shortened phrase for "**betwixt and between**." Here but also there. Now but not yet. Today and someday. We live with one foot in this world and one foot in the next. We are pilgrims journeying through this land to the land beyond. We are strangers in a strange world traveling home.

### **When Easter Comes Late**

Holy Week reminds us that the road to Easter travels through Good Friday. There is no empty tomb without the cross. We cannot experience the Resurrection without the Crucifixion. And quite frankly, there are moments not only in the church calendar but also the Christian life when Easter comes late.

Examples:

- |                |                        |
|----------------|------------------------|
| ✓ Loneliness   | ✓ Broken Relationships |
| ✓ Depression   | ✓ Errant Children      |
| ✓ Illness      | ✓ Lost Jobs            |
| ✓ Chronic Pain | ✓ Economic Hardship    |
| ✓ Death        | ✓ Unfulfilled Dreams   |
| ✓ Grief        | ✓ Unbearable Burdens   |

The day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday is known as **Holy Saturday**. In the Gospels, nothing significant occurred on this day. It was the Jewish Sabbath, so all of

the Jewish people observed the day of rest. In the Bible, the only event noted on Saturday was that Pilate ordered a Roman guard placed at Jesus' tomb. For the disciples, it appeared to be the end of their journey. Despite Christ's words of promise, they did not anticipate what the next day would bring.

In *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, a Christian funeral is entitled *A Service of Death and Resurrection*. On a few occasions in my ministry, I have preached a funeral service on Holy Saturday. There is not a more apt time in the church year that captures the twin realities of death AND resurrection.

We stand at a graveside between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The scene captures the reality of the Christian life in a fallen world. In the face of death, we declare the words of life.

Like the man seeking healing for his child, we say to Christ, "*Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.*" Because sometimes it feels like Easter will never come.

When our children were younger, we took an annual **family vacation** to the beach. We filled the back seat with activities to keep them occupied. After a few miles down the road, however, they would begin a litany that every parent will recognize. It began with the question, "**Are we there yet?**" Since we were still riding in the car, then the answer seemed self-evident to me, but my wife and I would take turns saying, "No, we're not there yet."

This answer never seemed to satisfy our children. They would immediately ask a follow-up question that every parent will recognize. "**How much longer?**" At first, I would respond with the exact number of hours and minutes remaining in the trip. However, I quickly realized this meant nothing to them. I had to phrase my answer in terms they could understand.

When our firstborn was two years old, a kids program on PBS debuted named *Barney*. Perhaps you've heard of this man-size, purple dinosaur?!? I've watched umpteen million episodes of *Barney* and can pretty much recite the first year's dialogue and songs from memory.

So when our children would ask, "How much longer?" we learned to time out the trip in *Barney* episodes. We would say, "Oh, its three more *Barneys* before we arrive!"

When Easter comes late, we cry out like children to our heavenly Father. We plaintively ask, "Are we there yet?" Then we ask, "How much longer?" What seems to last forever is but a moment in the context of time. In the midst of time, we cannot comprehend the perspective of eternity. We're almost there . . . but not yet. However, our Lord promises that Easter is coming.

### **The Easter Vigil**

I mentioned not much happens on Holy Saturday in the Gospel accounts; and the same is true in most churches. In the Methodist churches I have served over the years, the only traditional, liturgical event on that day tends to be the annual Easter Egg Hunt. And while bunnies, baskets, candy eggs, and plastic grass are a lot of fun, they don't contain a great deal of theological significance!

However, there is an ancient tradition in the church to hold an **Easter Vigil** on Saturday night. In the Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions, the first mass of Easter actually occurs after sunset on Holy Saturday night. The service begins in darkness which is then illuminated with the lighting of the Paschal candle. Throughout the long night, the light reminds the gathered congregation of the coming morning.

This past week I reread the gospel accounts of the Resurrection. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all recount the dramatic events that occurred that first Easter morning. The women going to anoint Jesus' body . . . the sunrise . . . a violent earthquake . . . the stone rolled away from the tomb . . . the angelic proclamation . . . the women fleeing the tomb to share the good news.

Here's a detail we often miss, however. The stone was not rolled away to release Jesus' body from the tomb. The stone was rolled away so that the women and the disciples would witness what God had done. No one knows the exact moment when the Resurrection actually occurred.

### **Conclusion**

Today is Palm/Passion Sunday. We enter Holy Week with both anticipation and trepidation. Our journey will take us to the foot of the cross on Good Friday. And we will wait . . . and wait . . . on Holy Saturday.

Oftentimes, this is where we find ourselves in life. The kingdom of God is near but not yet here. We live betwixt and between the two realities. We live in night's darkness awaiting the dawn's light. We are an Easter people; but sometimes Easter comes late. However, Easter IS coming.

And so we wait. Amen.