

Sermon for April 13, 2025, Palm Sunday

Text: Luke 22:1–23:56

Sermon: “Present Suffering, Future Joy”

Today we are brought to the threshold of Holy Week. We have heard of our Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem in the midst of the chants of hosanna and the waving of festival palm branches. We have heard the old and yet ever-new story of the Lamb who goes uncomplaining to the cross of Calvary and his atoning death there.

The readings this Sunday give us an opportunity to pause and reflect on the question as to how we best meditate on the suffering and death of the Savior.

Martin Luther observed, **“Some people meditate on Christ’s passion by venting their anger on the Jews. This singing and ranting about wretched Judas satisfies them, for they are in the habit of complaining about other people, of condemning and reproaching their adversaries. That might well be a meditation on the wickedness of Judas and the Jews, but not on the sufferings of Christ”** (AE 42:7).

Luther goes on to remind us that we rightly meditate on Christ's Passion by recognizing that our sins crucified Jesus, and yet, through this murderous treatment of God's Son, the world is reconciled to God so that in his blood we have peace (Luke 22–23).

His mother, Mary, stood at a distance, watching as his body was taken down from the cross and wrapped in a finely woven linen shroud. As the sturdy white fabric enveloped his lifeless remains, she strained to look upon her Son one last time. His head and body already covered by the cloth, all that remained visible were his once powerful hands. Like a snapshot frozen in time, they revealed the intensity of the suffering he had endured.

Rigid and stiff, they lay folded across his chest, contorted fingers clenched tight. Just above the wrists, unbearably large gashes could be seen—the place where the nails had ripped open a hole in his flesh. The deep, dark red of his wounds looked all the more shockingly real against the impressive whiteness of the burial cloth.

Consumed with sorrow, grief, and pain, Mary turned away from that dreadful image, certain those nails had ruined her life. Life, you see, doesn't always turn out the way you might expect.

Just a few days before, it had all been so different. Riding confidently into town, seated on a donkey, thousands of people waved palm branches and cheered his name. With great enthusiasm, they cried aloud, ***“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! . . . Hosanna in the highest!”***

(Mark 11:9–10). The excitement, the energy, the passion for her Son was like nothing she had ever seen. For the first time in her life, she dared to believe he might actually be the long-expected King. For the first time in her life, she dared to believe her deepest hopes and dreams might actually come true.

But then, suddenly, everything changed. He was betrayed, arrested, put on trial, and nailed to that terrible cross. Her hopes and dreams now shattered, she had nothing left except the haunting image of his stiff and rigid hands, the unbearably large gashes, the deep, dark red of his wounds. Those nails, you see, had ruined her life. Life doesn't always turn out the way you might expect.

The older and older we get, the more we discover how true that statement is. The excitement, the energy, the wonder we experienced as children slowly fades away, leaving us with the mundane routine of bills, work, and family obligations. As we grow up, we come to learn that the hopes and dreams of our youth never quite seem to be fulfilled.

We spend our lives thinking, if only my marriage were a little bit better; if only I could make a little more money; if only my children were a little more successful; if only I were just a little more attractive, then I would be happy. Then I would finally be content.

But all too often, loving marriages grow cold, exciting careers turn dull, gifted children lose their way, and youthful bodies grow old. And then, when we least expect it, tragedy strikes. Suffering, disease, and death disrupt our humdrum lives, waking us from our slumber and causing us to cry out in despair.

“Why, God, would you allow this to happen? Why, God, does life always have to be so full of sorrow and pain and hurt?” These are the ultimate questions we all must face.

These are the ultimate questions that can be understood only in light of the cross of Jesus Christ. For as we will soon celebrate at the end of this Holy Week, a few days after he died, Jesus rose again from the dead and appeared before his disciples in the Upper Room where they had been hiding. His mother, Mary, was there as well. Strong and full of life, Jesus raised his arms into the air; his hands opened wide, inviting all to see. Incredibly, just above both wrists, the large gashes left by the nails could still be seen, except now they looked somehow beautiful.

Filled with wonder, joy, and awe, Mary stared at his wounds, realizing in that moment that the nails hadn't ruined her life after all the nails had saved her life.

On the day that we stand before the Lord in glory, gazing upon his nail-scarred hands, we, too, will realize that everything we thought had ruined our lives was actually used by God to save it. In that moment, every single thing that has caused us sorrow will not simply be forgotten, but will become for us an everlasting source of joy. Our cries of pain will one day be transformed into endless songs of praise.

For now, our sufferings may seem to bode the undoing of everything we hope for. But since Christ bears those scars for us, through the Cross, we can be confident that our present suffering will one day be transformed into everlasting joy. Life, you see, doesn't always turn out the way we might expect.

In Jesus name! Amen