

Palm Sunday (Year B) – March 29, 2015
Mark 11:1-11 (or John 12:12-16); Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29 (Liturgy of the Palms);
Passion Sunday (Year B) Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11;
Mark 14:1-15:47
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

**The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ According to Mark:
The Tragedy of Love's Labor Lost...and a "Little Rainbow"**

Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday, has a wrenching quality about it. It begins with the jubilation of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—as we held high our palms in rejoicing. But then we are pulled right into the earth-shaking stormy blast of Jesus' final showdown—his arrest, trial, torture and execution—his Passion, as it's called—a dramatic shift, a major change of scenery and a jarring mood swing. This year we hear Mark's Passion narrative.

During the terrible years of the Second World War when inhumanity and political insanity held much of the world in their grip and Nazi domination of Europe seemed irrevocable, something remarkable was taking place in a small Protestant village in southern France, called Le Chambon. During the time when the Vichy government—and later the Germans directly controlled the area for nearly four years of the war—there, quietly, peacefully and right under the noses of the authorities, Le Chambon's villagers and their clergy organized to save thousands of Jewish adults and children who were fleeing for their lives.¹ For those four stormy years, the villagers of Le Chambon sheltered the Jewish people who came to their doors. They hid them in their homes. They provided them with forged documents. They showed them the paths in the woods where they could flee when the Gestapo came looking for them. They found ways to get them to the safety of Switzerland. While few other villages were doing so, the town of Le Chambon took in the Jews who came to their doors at enormous risk to themselves and their village. And they maintained throughout the war the faith and courage to take in these strangers in desperate need throughout the stormy blasts of that terrible time. The philosopher Philip Hallie, himself a Jewish US Army combat veteran in the war, spoke of that war as storm and tempest, lightning and thunder, but there in the midst of all that was a rainbow, the light and colors of goodness, the village of Le Chambon.

At the present time in the greater Middle East, we continue to witness the stormy blasts of wars and repression and terror—lightning and thunder—looking for rainbows in the storms of the now several-year old so-called "Arab Spring" in which we had hoped to see the rainbow in the faces of liberated peoples. And that brings us to this Palm Sunday. The weather patterns, as it were, on the original Palm Sunday began with calm and beauty and the full sunshine of a triumphant albeit humble entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. But soon clouds began to form and the winds began to blow over the next few days. Instead of taking the world by storm in leading a violent revolution, Jesus, instead, entered into the eye of the storm, unarmed. Soon the storm erupted and everyone was scattered as we hear in the narrative of the arrest, torture and execution of Jesus according to Mark's gospel. This too, was lightening and hail and tempest, with darkness covering the land.

And in the midst of hearing this we look for a rainbow. As we brace ourselves to enter this storm in our Passion reading from Mark's gospel today and in this Holy Week ahead, we hear again the tragedy of Love's labor lost—the God of Love was not too strong to suffer and die. God does not slip past or through the crucifixion. Jesus—God incarnate—suffers and dies at our hands as the hated Love of God, and in the profoundest sense alone as the God-forsaken God.ⁱⁱ But because God would die for you and me, for us all, we see that there is meaning and hope in all this. And we don't have to rush to Easter to know this.

Though many of us, I think, would rather skip over all this and fast forward to next Sunday, Easter Sunday, when we will be singing “Jesus Christ is risen today”—the Christian alternative to “Somewhere over the rainbow”—to see that Jesus is this storm's rainbow—the light and colors of goodness. He is the fulfillment of God's undaunted, deliberate promise proclaimed at the dawn of history to Noah that never again would God destroy God's Creation, but would redeem it instead—the ancient promise to Noah marked by a rainbow. And although it is just through one man anointed by God who faced the full force of the stormy blast of human fear, ignorance and violence, somehow, this would be universal in its impact and meaning for all humanity. The Risen Jesus is the new Reality that, when all the havoc and destruction of that storm had run its course, the restorative and redemptive power of God's Love was, in fact, shockingly and awesomely stronger than the powers of fear and violence, and of death itself. That's the Easter reality, the Rainbow of the Risen Christ.ⁱⁱⁱ

And today, Mark's gospel helps us along with this understanding. In this reading we are about to hear, we enter the great storm where, in the midst of it, it appears no rainbow can be seen...or wait! It isn't that obvious, but Mark actually leaves us a little rainbow right in the midst of this story; and it is only Mark amongst the gospel writers who tucks this into the midst of this horrific event. I point it out so that you won't miss it during the telling of the story. It's found at the scene of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. All of his disciples have just fled, leaving Jesus alone with his captors, *except* for a certain young man who was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. It says then, “They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.” Unique to Mark's gospel, this little vignette is regarded by some as a personal signature or a mini self-portrait—Mark writing himself into the story. But if we look closer, this young man who fled naked during the arrest of Jesus is more correctly understood as an “angel interpreter” whose presence creates a little rainbow in the midst of Mark's account of this most violent storm. Appearing at the precise moment of Jesus' arrest, the young man (in Greek, *neaniskos*) was seized (14:51) just as Jesus had been seized (14:46), yet he escaped leaving only a linen cloth (in Greek “sindon”). Now just think ahead for a moment: for a few days later, when Jesus' empty tomb is discovered, only a linen cloth (“sindon”) was left, and the young man (“neaniskos”) seated by his tomb explains that Jesus had not been seized by death for long, saying, “He has been raised; he is not here” (16:6). It's the same mysterious young man, the one given the exact same description at the Resurrection—the angel messenger of Easter who appears earlier during this great storm of Jesus' arrest and inevitable execution, to be a little rainbow on this day. God gives us a little rainbow

promise in the very midst of a huge storm; and not only in this story, but in whatever storms that rage in each of our lives.

So now, I let Mark's gospel speak for itself.^{iv} May our hearing of the Passion Gospel today and our journey through this Holy Week ahead help us to search and find and become what we are seeking—the light and color of goodness. Let us remain seated as we hear the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark.

ⁱ The story of Le Chambon was recounted by Philip Hallie in his book Lest Innocent Blood be Shed, and retold in a novel by Robert Daly, The Innocents Within.

ⁱⁱ Jesus hung on a cross and cried the deepest cry of storm-battered dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—the only words from the Cross that are spoken in Mark's gospel.

ⁱⁱⁱ So, if we can't help but rush to Easter, for those of us who believe that Jesus was risen early on the Sunday morning following his death—and for those who also believe that Jesus became dust to dust just as the rest of us will, the conclusion is inescapable that he came out somehow the victor, with the victory of “seemingly powerless love over loveless power,” as William Sloane Coffin put it. (William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 70).

What emerged from his death was a kind of way, of truth, of life without which the last 2000 years would probably have been even more unthinkable than they've been. He showed us that a life given away for love's sake and God's justice is the life most worth living. It's important to note that the cross of Christ is more a symbol of life than of death, of living than of dying, for it takes a lot of living to be selected as a target for martyrdom. And thus we don't need to rush to Easter to see the rainbow – to know that somehow Jesus came out the victor.

^{iv} And there are plenty of good reasons to let this gospel speak for itself, not the least of which is again this preacher's reluctance not to be one more voice violating the near silence of Jesus. The Passion narrative begins with Jesus' quiet “unanswered prayer” in Gethsemane at the base of the Mount of Olives—“Father, for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me...” After that the story is full of noise (- the arrest, the interrogation, the noise of the cock crowing, the noise of the crowd, the noise of the men crucified next to Jesus, the taunting noises near the cross). Yet at the center of it all is the astounding silence of God. It is the one voice Jesus can't seem to hear, a silence so difficult to bear that Jesus uses his last breath to break it with his own voice of desolation “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”