

Who is This? Palm Sunday 2015

Matthew 21:1-11

Twenty four years ago next month, April 1991, as the city of Boston was gearing up for the 95th running of the Boston Marathon, my 93 year old grandmother decided that it was time she went and saw it. She'd lived in Boston for decades at that point, but had never been to the marathon.

Now frail and wheel-chair bound, she figured time was not on her side, and it was time to get out there and be a true Bostonian.

Cheer on the runners.

She called my brother Andy. "I want you and Alida to take me to the race," she said.

So, by golly, we did. Early on the morning of April 14, we wheeled her out of the nursing home she lived in, while she shouted triumphantly to the other residents "I'm off to the marathon!"

We drove out of the city to about the six mile mark of the course, parked the car, lifted her out, and wheeled her to the curb, ready to watch the runners come down the road; the front runners were about 5 minutes away.

Always a woman of firm opinions,

Grandma then declared that she felt she would have a better view if we wheeled her to the other side of the road, and quickly so we pushed her across the road to the other curb.

It was only after the runners began streaming down the road that we realized what we'd done.

What had been envisioned as a little outing to give Grandma a taste of the marathon was now going to be, well, a marathon--

because, of course, with thousands upon thousands of runners coming down that road, there was no way to get Grandma back to the car.

Because, let's face it, when someone has spent a lifetime training to get into the Boston marathon,

you really shouldn't ruin it for them by rolling your grandmother in front of them as they head for heartbreak hill.

So we settled in to watch. The whole thing.

And thank God we did.

Because long after those elite runners had blazed by,
long after we'd cheered the first woman,
over the crest of the hill came a sight to take your breath away ...
and as the people who were still there watching began to see it,
they nudged others to attention, began to shout out, to cheer and to clap.
Who was it?

It was a man maybe 50 years old,
pushing a wheelchair along the marathon course,
running hard and pushing a wheelchair.

And in the wheelchair was a young man,
his blond hair lofting in the breeze,
and a grin on his face like I'd never seen.

Who is this? I said to my brother.

My grandmother, from her own wheelchair, looked up at us.

Who is this? she said.

It's the Hoyts, my brother said, Dick Hoyt pushing his son Rick.

They run the marathon together every year.

They passed by us then, and we could see:
the gritted determination of the father,
and the son's absolute delight
as he flew down the course in his wheelchair.
And my grandmother and I, my brother and I,
we all began to cry
at such love
at such pure joy.

Who is this?

said someone in the crowd,
the crowd lining the streets in Jerusalem,
as the man came into view over the crest of the hill.
The ones who recognized him were cheering wildly,
some had grabbed branches from the trees to wave exultantly,
shouting Hosanna.

Who is this? that someone repeated -- puzzled, confused --

this man coming down the hill was no king, no high priest,
he was riding a donkey.

Who is this?

It's Jesus said the woman next to him. From Nazareth. It's Jesus.
And as the man passed by in front of them,
they saw the gritted determination
and they began to cry at such love. At such love.

Here we are on this first day of Holy Week,
palm branches clutched in our hands,
listening to the story of a man who entered Jerusalem
with courage and love
and the question is ours, too.

The question is ours.

Who is this?

Who is this Jesus?

For you, for me, then, and now --
who is this?

Four weeks ago, a young man stood up here at front,
gripping a microphone so tight his knuckles were white.
Standing next to him, I could see what all of you probably couldn't:
that he was trembling, and there were beads of sweat trickling down his face.
He was just that nervous.

He'd never spoken to a group before,
and I just asked him to say a few words.

He was here with the men from Pivot House,
the addiction recovery home we support --
he wasn't just with the men, he was one of them,
but he was my son's age, still to me a baby.

And once he started talking, the trembling stopped,
and he told us how bad life had been,
until he found this place that took him in.

Until he found this place where he was introduced to a friend,
to a friend named Jesus.

And this friend, he told us, loved him no matter what,
forgave him for everything past,
and wanted everything future to be filled with hope.
And still holding on so tightly to that microphone, he said to us
"If you had told me a year ago that I would standing in front of a bunch of people
singing with a *gospel* choir,
singing about how much I love the Lord,
I would have told you were crazy.
But here I am. And I'm never going back."

So who is this Jesus?

Who is this?

The one who offers healing to those whom life has broken,
the one who offers friendship to those whom others have left,
the one who sits beside a scared, scarred boy and holds him close.

At the women's retreat last weekend, some of us were remembering
a woman who in the past never missed a retreat, Jeanne Leebaert.

If she was still among us, she'd be 92 now;
she kept us company on those retreats well into her 80's.

Jeanne had a story she liked to share on our retreats;
some of us heard it many times, but never tired of it.

It was her Jesus story.

In the time following her husband's death,
in the depths of her loneliness and grief,
Jeanne had seen Jesus.

"I don't mean I imagined him", she would tell us,

"I mean I saw him."

In a gathering of friends, but feeling alone in her sorrow,
Jeanne had looked across the room and seen someone gazing at her with such love,
she said, such love.

She asked her friends if they saw him, too, and they didn't know what she was talking
about, and probably wondered if she'd lost it.

The first time she told us, probably some of us thought the same.

She said she had kept the story to herself for many years, because she knew it sounded crazy.

But it was real, she told us.

*And I knew then that I was loved. And that love never ends,
And that I was going to be all right.*

So who is this?

Who is this Jesus?

The one who brings light into grief's deepest darkness.

The one whose love breaks through whatever walls we've put around us,
whose love transcends even what we can understand.

The one whose presence in our lives isn't limited by what we can explain.

When our India mission team stood up here just a few weeks ago,

and told you stories of the children we care for in the slums,

and the Indian girls whose dreams we support,

there was a name they mentioned a bunch of times,

the name of the man who works with those kids -- T.L. Reddy.

What they didn't tell you is how he came to be there,

this man whose ministry inspires us.

T.L. was born in the slums,

to a woman whose husband had abandoned her with five children,

and no income.

T.L. couldn't go to school, there was no money for books or clothes,

and besides, his mother needed him and his siblings to earn what they could --
by begging or cleaning.

There was a Christian children's home nearby;

the woman who ran it would not only pay them to clean,

but give them food to take home ...

and when she learned that no one was in school,

she got them there.

Years later, TL heard Mother Teresa speak.

She told her room full of listeners, including TL, that Christ was calling each of them to
care for the least and the lost.

And so this young man who had been the least, had been the lost,

resolved then to pour his life back into the slums. That was 35 years ago.
"I think sometimes I love these children so much because I have lived their lives," he told us this year.
And he does love them. So much.

So who is this? Who is this Jesus?

The one who is compassion,
and who calls us to compassion.

The one who was at work in the kindness of the children's home,
The one who spoke to many through the words of a tiny powerful Indian nun,
The one who gives strength to a little man named TL who wakes up each day determined to be Christ's hands and heart to the children of the slums.

Dick and Judy Hoyt gave birth to their son Rick in 1962.

Diagnosed with severe cerebral palsy ,
he was paralyzed from the neck down and unable to speak.

They were twenty-two years old.

The doctors told them to institutionalize Rick,
and start their lives over again.

Dick and Judy went away to think about it.

They went to their church, sat in the pews, and asked God for help.
And in their prayer they found the crazy strength to bring Rick home
and day by day, year by year, fell more and more in love with him.

They found a way for him to communicate,
and discovered he was gifted with bright intellect, great humor, and compassion.

When Rick learned that a road race was to be held to raise funds for a young man paralyzed in a sports accident,

he asked his dad to push him in his wheelchair along the race course,
so that he could show that young man that paralysis didn't mean the end.

And so Dick pushed the wheelchair, all five miles,
and that night Rick painstakingly typed these words:

"Dad, in the race with you today, I felt like I wasn't handicapped anymore."

So they began to run and to run, race after race,
marathon after marathon.

Dick the picture of complete determination
and Rick the very image of joy, spirit flying free of his body,
soaring down race courses in grace and beauty.

Two years ago was to be their last Boston Marathon,
but the bombs stopped them before they could finish.

And so last year was their last.

And in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, near the start line of the marathon,
stands a bronze statue now of Team Hoyt.

"Yes You Can" it says across the base.

So who is this Jesus?

The one who moved a young couple to do what they could not have done alone,
who gave a father the strength to run and not be weary,
so that his son might be borne up on eagle's wings.

This is Jesus.

This is our Jesus.

The one who brings comfort in our loneliness
and healing to our wounds.

The one who brings light into our darkness
and opens our hearts in love.

The one who brings strength beyond imagining.

What I invite you to do in this holiest of weeks
is both simple and sometimes so very hard:

Believe that.

Believe in who Jesus was for those who followed him,
believe in who Jesus is for those who need him
believe in who he can be for you.

Who then is this?

Our hope.

Our strength.

Our Savior ... our friend.

And the one whose love -- as this week we will see -- is without limit. Amen.