

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 2, 2017  
Sermon Title: Easter Prequel: Holy Week Explained  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: "What If?" A Christmas Eve Litany

## What If?

David: What if it all happened?

**People: What if God came down  
in a little baby  
in a tiny village  
in a humble stable  
in a poor family  
long, long ago  
far, far away?**

David: What if  
shepherds really were watching their flocks by night  
and angels really did sing  
of good news  
of great joy  
for all people  
loud and clear?

**People: What if  
a star did wander the skies  
and caught the wise men's eyes  
who followed the star  
and found the baby  
and gave their gifts?**

David: What if it all happened  
really, really happened  
and we believed  
really, really believed  
the prophecy,  
the miracle,

the purpose,  
the person?

**Together:    What if  
                 we spent a full year  
                 — all of 2017 —  
                 living each moment  
                 as if  
                 we believed tonight?**

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Well, that was a surprise, wasn't it, beginning our sermon time today, two weeks before Easter, with the "What If" litany we used for Christmas Eve? "What if" all those Christmas stories really happened? What if God came down as a little baby in a little tiny village in a humble stable in a poor family long, long ago, far, far away? What if all that business with the shepherds and the angels and the wise men and the star and the virgin birth and the incarnation, all the miracles and wonders, what if all that happened? How would we live life differently the rest of the year?

I took you back to Christmas Eve because we are about to ask you the same question about Easter. Two weeks from this morning that will be our Easter theme: What if the whole Holy Week, Good Friday, Maundy Thursday, Easter Sunday, crucifixion/resurrection, Jesus is dead, Jesus is *not* dead story is true? So I thought we'd use today to warm you up for Holy Week! Holy Week is the week leading up to Easter. It's a microcosm of Jesus's life and teachings. It's everything you need to know squeezed into seven days.

Other religions have similar concentrated spiritual seasons. In September we have the Jewish High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and then Succoth, an almost 3-week period of religious devotion. For Muslims, there is a full month of Ramadan, a time of fasting, sacrifice, devotion, all centered on faith. For Christians, when it comes to intensity, nothing matches Holy Week. Here's the "CliffsNotes" version:

Holy Week begins with Palm Sunday. Jesus was a country boy. His success and reputation were built in the countryside. He was safe, beloved, popular, out there somewhere. But he made the decision to go to Jerusalem. He would challenge the authorities. He would confront the powers that be, he would go into the belly of the beast of the Roman Empire and lay it all on the line.

He knew what it meant. He told his disciples, "We are going to Jerusalem, where I'll be betrayed and turned over to the authorities. They will condemn me. They will mock me, spit on me, whip me, and kill me. Three days later, I will rise." (Mark 8:31-32; 10:32-34)

The disciples tried to talk him out of it. They saw it as pointless and hopeless, but when he was determined, St. Thomas ended the debate, saying, "Let us also go that we may die with him." (John 11:16) They knew what they were headed into.

Now, that's the background to Palm Sunday, it's a prequel. Palm Sunday itself was a terrific celebration, and that's what makes Holy Week so important. There are so many surprises, so many twists and turns; all of human experience and human emotion is lived out through the seven days.

Jesus goes to Jerusalem knowing, announcing he'll be betrayed, condemned, mocked, beaten, spat upon, and crucified. Yet when he enters Jerusalem, the people go nuts. There's a huge parade, the folks love him, they tear off palm branches to greet him, they toss their cloaks on the ground to honor him, they cheer and chant and dance, as if he's some sort of conquering hero, a national savior, or (dare we say it?) a Messiah!

But it doesn't last long. It's downhill from there. There are a few days of intrigue and provocation, the seeds of betrayal are set in motion, the plot to kill him picks up speed, and before we know it, it's Thursday. Maundy Thursday. "Maundy" means "commandment" because Jesus issues a new commandment: "Love, love, love, all you need is love." You've heard that before, probably sung it, but the Beatles stole it from Jesus. And "Love makes the world go 'round"? Somebody on Broadway (Bob Merrill) stole that from Jesus.

Jesus said love your neighbor, love your enemy, love yourself, love God. Love, love, love, love. Jesus said it. Commanded it. Did it. That's Holy Week, the doing of it. That's the "Maundy" of "Thursday." Jesus washes the disciples' feet, tells us to do the same. He offers the bread of his body, the cup of his blood, and tells us to never forget it. He goes to the Garden of Gethsemane, "the last temptation of Christ," where he imagines putting the brakes on, but he doesn't. Judas kisses him. Peter attacks the attackers. Jesus sides with the attackers. Peter denies him. And then it's Friday. Good Friday.

I taught my first Confirmation class in 1968. They asked the same questions our kids asked last Monday night: "Why is it called 'Good' Friday? Jesus got killed just like he said he would. He gets condemned, mocked, whipped, spat upon, and horribly, horribly executed. What could possibly be 'good' about that?" It's a hard sell. Speaking of "hard sells," it's actually my job to sell it. Not just Easter, that's the fun part, that's the happy ending. They should call Easter "Good Sunday" and come up with some other, more dubious term for Friday like "Bad Friday."

Yet I have to sell the non-Easter part of Holy Week, the not-so-good Friday of crucifixion, the Thursday of Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial, and "Jesus's body, broken for us, and blood, shed for us" at the Last Supper. And even Palm Sunday, that over-the-top welcome to Jesus that seems so fake in the days after, when the crowds fled and the cheers died and the hopes were dashed. I have to sell that.

Once upon a time, Holy Week was the highlight of Christian year, and there are places where it still is. When I was in Nicaragua, they regaled me with Holy Week stories: massive pilgrimages the whole week long, huge processions, packed Churches day after day, all to relive Jesus's final week, the good (of Palm Sunday), the bad (of Maundy Thursday), the ugly (of Good Friday), and the really, really, really good (of Easter).

But it's a hard sell nowadays. School vacations, spring breaks, sports practices, work. And, let's face it, the not so upbeat messages in between Palm Sunday's fun and Easter's joy.

Some years ago, Church member Nikki Wingate invited me to make a presentation to her M.B.A. marketing students at Fairfield University. She asked me to present a product to be marketed. I presented Holy Week! I said to the class, "Here's a product that's been around for 2,000 years. People have already decided whether they want it or don't, and most of them don't. It has a mixed-bag history of gore and guilt and even anti-Semitism. How do we get people to try it, to give it a chance, to take a look or a second look at it?" I told them it's like trying to sell Coca-Cola in Atlanta. Everybody's already made up their mind.

The M.B.A. students had some great ideas. We listened to them, and over the years, we've worked hard to present a Holy Week with a fresh look. It's not the same old, same old, but it's also not an attempt to be hip, trendy, just for the

sake of being cool. It's like our Church—still old, still historic, still traditional, yet wonderfully alive and real and personal.

Our Maundy Thursday service (can I put it this way?) . . . well, it's really cool. To begin with, the Maundy Thursday and Good Friday evening services have the advantage of being in the evening. I know we all love our quaint little picturesque country Church on a Sunday morning, the big windows making it feel as though creation is sitting on our lap. All true. But this place is spellbinding in the evening. There is a serenity here, an inner strength, that speaks through the darkness. The old, old hymns sound purer. Our imaginations take flight; the Scriptures feel as though they are stories written just for you; the choir is sweet. And our sermon goes right to the heart of it all.

On Maundy Thursday the heart of it all is the Table. The Communion Table. We started a tradition some years ago, very special, very pretty. We create one long table, all the way from the back of the Church to up here at the front and out toward the sides. Linen tablecloths, candlelight and flowers, fresh bread and grape juice within everyone's reach. When it's time for Communion, we all gather around the table, all together, breaking the bread, passing it around, pouring for one another. But first, we darken the Church, and Alida uses the power of visual images to tell the story in dynamic, beautiful ways. You'll feel the Holy and the Communion of Holy Communion. You'll feel the Maundy of Maundy Thursday.

Good Friday will amaze you. Alida's noontime service dares to call itself a "child-friendly" service, and it really is. Good Friday, with the cross and sorrow and all that, so hard; but she makes it, yes, beautiful, yes, child friendly. Including our own version of the Stations of the Cross out on the Green.

The evening service is haunting. I don't mean in a ghost-story way, but haunting in a way that will get to you. It will take your faith to a very special place in your heart. The cross is at the heart of it, but when your heart and the cross come together, you will never see the cross in the same way again.

And Easter? Well, it's fun, it's beautiful, it's spring. We have flowers and Easter bonnets and glorious music, we have a heated tent outside with live video on a large-screen TV for great crowds. But that's not why everybody comes. Everybody comes for a very simple reason. Can I be blunt? Everybody comes because everybody dies. Everybody misses somebody. Everybody wants to

believe that after death there is more . . . more love, more time, more life. Somehow.

Sure, I know all about atheists on the increase, people fed up with organized religion. I get all that. Life ends. We're put in the ground. Kaput. I get all that. But here's a *fact*, not a fancy, a *fact*. Once a year, and several very, very special times in our lifetime, we want faith. We really, really, really want faith. We want to believe that there is a God who can take the worst moment of our life and transform it into a miracle.

And so, in this little Church, this old, rickety country Church, we do what we've been doing up on this hill for 300 years. We grab hold of faith and let it take us for a ride.

If you're around, I hope you try Holy Week our way.