

**PALM SUNDAY CHRISTIANS**  
Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch  
Palm Sunday – March 24, 2024

TEXT: Mark 14:27-31

Where's the place that you feel closest to God? Where do you go to feel the presence of God most clearly? Some people say that the mountains others say being in the sanctuary the church. I've even heard people say just walking around Lake Storey.

Mountaintops have always been important to me as well as the ocean. I've had retreats to both locations the mountains and the ocean and it truly felt the presence of God moving in those places.

Once, when I was in college, our college fellowship group from church took a trip to Galveston one spring break. Galveston is near the Gulf of Mexico in South Texas. It was a great time to lie on the beach and relax and watch the ocean waves. One day we had worship on the beach, and I will never forget the beauty of the moment. We gathered together in a tight circle and had communion and sang songs of faith. One song was called: *"Have You Seen Jesus My Lord?"* It's a wonderful song one that is not sung very much anymore. It's kind of a camp song. The verses of the song were so appropriate. The chorus is: *"Have you seen Jesus My Lord? He's here in plain view. Take a look, open your eyes. He'll show it to you."* And then there's one verse goes like this: *"have you ever stood at the ocean, with the white foam at your feet? Felt the endless thundering motion? Then I'd say -- you've -- seen Jesus my Lord."* And then one other verse that I really like goes like this: *"Have you ever looked at the cross, with a man hanging in pain -- seen the look of love in His eyes. Then I say -- you've seen - Jesus my Lord."*

As we sang that song, we could hear the ocean waves and actually see the white foam. Truly we felt God was present at that very moment. After worship, everyone hugged each other, and we all felt very close to each other. It was a mountaintop experience, and we truly did feel like we could see Jesus our Lord.

But then we returned to Fort Worth, to life as usual on a college campus. I really expected that somehow our fellowship group would have changed. I thought we would all be closer and more spiritual. I truly believed attendance at church would be up. But that was not the case. People started fighting and bickering. Gossip continued and people got their feelings hurt. And what made it even worse --- attendance actually dropped! Everyone had fallen away. Everyone had lost that special feeling we had for God - and each other on that Ocean Beach. Everyone had fallen away.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? When you go to a camp or renewal conference and have a mountaintop experience--- only to return to life as usual, disappointed. Things really aren't changed at all. Many times, I have been at spiritual retreats for teenagers or for adults, where people are so revived and renewed, and they make vows that they are going to change their life and start living for Jesus. And I always wonder to myself, what will they be like when they get home and they have to face the same old stress and strain of life?

Think about what the Palm Sunday crowd was like. We've heard how the people were so excited to see Jesus, riding on a donkey, into Jerusalem. The people started shouting: "*Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*" They took palm branches and laid them down on the ground along with their garments on the road. It was an incredible parade. They were giving Him a hero's welcome in hopes that He was the king who would shatter all the enemies of Israel.

But the crowd had a wrong and exaggerated expectation of Jesus as the Messiah. They expected Him to be a national leader who would restore their nation to its former glory. They had their own agendas and their own "wants" of what they wanted Him to do. They seemed willing to praise Him if He was being that triumphant, conquering king --- but they certainly weren't willing to follow a servant like Jesus all the way to the cross. No--- their hopes were dashed and they turned against Jesus. Soon, their cries of Hosanna were changed to jeers and curses - crucify Him!

Question comes to us today: are we Palm Sunday Christians or Easter people? Are we part of that fickle crowd that will only follow Jesus when things are smooth and easy and we believe Jesus will do something for us? Do we shout "Hosanna" on Sunday and then turn against Him by Friday and shout "Crucify Him"? Do we fall away from Jesus and act like fickle Palm Sunday Christians?

Now you may be sitting there thinking -- "no, not me" -- "I would never say 'Crucify Him' --- I could never fall away from Jesus and deny Him." But be careful how quick you are to state your loyalty. It is really easy to state your loyalty and shout your praises on Palm Sunday -- but can you say it on Good Friday when your life brings you trials and temptations and fears?

The disciples were just like us back then. They were quick to say: "*Lord, I'll follow you everywhere. I'll never deny you. I'll stand by your side.*" But Jesus knew better. Jesus knew their weaknesses. Jesus knew that they would be tempted to fall away and they would.

In our gospel reading today, from Mark 14:27-31, Jesus says to his disciples "*you will all fall away; for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. And all the disciples denied it saying that they would never fall away.'*" They would be steadfast and loyal and would stand by their master.

But in the end--- they all deserted Jesus. Judas came to Jesus in the guise of friendship and betrayed him. Guards came with swords and clubs and captured Jesus, and the disciples were filled with fear. In Mark 14:50, it reads that "*they all deserted him and ran away*". They were running for their lives. They were falling away from Jesus under pressure and panic.

How easy it is for us to be just like the disciples. We are so quick to claim our steadfast loyalty to Christ and our commitment. But how often do we forsake our Lord and fall away? Think about those times of pressure and panic when we have denied that we're Christians - or refused to stand up for our values.

What about those times when we are with our friends and gossip starts and people are put down and criticized. Do we stand up for Christ and speak a word of love for our neighbor? Or what about when someone starts to tell a bad joke that degrades a person or another gender or race? Do we stand up for Christ and talk about love that builds up rather than tears down? Do we go out of our way to share our faith with someone, or do we hide the fact that we are a Christian afraid that we might be offensive? How often do we fall away from Christ in our actions and in our words?

Now – again -- you may be sitting there saying: no, not me -- you aren't preaching to me today. I don't deny my Lord. I live a Christian life. I witness to others about my faith. I won't ever fall away. I'll *always* be steadfast and loyal, dedicated and committed.

But let me warn you. That is what Peter said to Jesus. Peter was so sure that he was different - an exception. Others might fall away but not him. He was not like other people. In verses 29 and 31, Peter flat denies that he would ever be to disloyal: “*even though they all fall away, I will not. If I must die with you, I will not deny you.*”

Do you remember what happened to Peter? Peter did follow Jesus after he was arrested. Everyone else left Jesus and fled away --- but not Peter. Peter followed Jesus, at a distance, all the way to the high priest. And that's when the trouble began. First, he sat among Jesus' enemies -- the guards that had arrested him. Secondly, he got out of the vision of Christ. His eyes started to focus on himself rather than on Jesus. And then, when asked if he was a friend of Jesus, Peter denied him three times.

Peter had forgotten the power of ridicule and crowd pressure. Peter had forgotten how difficult it is to follow Jesus when everyone around you is making fun of you for being a disciple. Peter had forgotten how difficult it is to follow Jesus when you are in the wrong crowd --- a crowd that is against Jesus. Peter had forgotten how hard it is to follow Jesus when your eyes are focused on yourself and not on Jesus. Peter had forgotten to keep his eyes on Jesus.

It is really easy to shake our heads in dismay at the disciples who deserted Jesus in His hour of trial and refused to stand up for Him. They were a sinful and hopeless lot. But we realize that we are an awful lot like those disciples. We are fickle Palm Sunday Christians that tend to fall away from our Lord when the going gets tough or something else demands our attention. We are not worthy of God's grace and mercy.

Some people, in realizing how miserable and unworthy we are, might react like Judas--- wanting to end his life and give up hope. But even in the passage we read today about the disciples falling away-- we can have hope. In verse 28 Jesus says: “but after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”

Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday but rose again from the dead on Easter morning. And what is so amazing is that one of the first things he did after he rose from the dead was that He went back and found those same disciples that had had abandoned Him. Even though all the disciples abandoned Him and denied Him, Jesus never abandoned them. Jesus even returned to their sides with open arms of grace and even gave them some more work to do. Jesus gave them

instructions to go into all the world and preach the gospel. He had faith in them and knew that they could change because of Easter. They could change from fickle Palm Sunday Christians to confident Easter people who kept their eyes on Jesus – their risen Lord.

We too can change because of Easter. Jesus comes back to us again and again, to give us words of grace and hope. And then He gives us some work to do – to go out and share the good news of Easter – that He is alive and loves us dearly – and wants us to live as His disciples.

As I close, I want to share with you a brief devotional thought I heard from Max Lucado about Palm Sunday. It reminds us what our role in Palm Sunday should be ... and how we can be the right kind of Palm Sunday Christian. Max writes it like this:

*When you look at all the participants in the drama of Palm Sunday, you have the people who celebrated Christ on Sunday, but they turned their back on Him on Friday. I can relate to that. You have the apostles who made promises to Him and then ran away from Him in the garden of Gethsemane. I can relate to that. But you know, I'd like to be like the donkey. The donkey was commissioned by Christ for a special task of carrying Christ into Jerusalem. I'd like to be known as the one who carries Christ into my home, my workplace, into the city. I know you would as well. How about you and I make a commitment this week of Holy Week that we are going to look for opportunities to carry Christ into our world. How do you make this week special – bringing Christ into your world. Maybe it can be something simple as just forgiving somebody, or being gracious when everybody else is cranky, or maybe it is extending mercy when everyone else wants to get even, or maybe you can just take a few minutes to pray for someone as you walk up and down your street – or through your classroom – just pray for someone. I believe all of these ways are ways in which we are imitating that donkey – we're bringing Christ into the world. Remember when you give your heart to Christ, He gives His heart to you... He takes up residence in you. And so, when you walk into your neighborhood, your workplace, your schoolroom, you are really bringing Christ. We can take steps to activate Him, to release the aroma of Christ. Oh, how we need that, don't we?*

#### **PRAYER:**

Oh Lord, our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak. At times we find ourselves falling asleep when we should be diligently at work for Your Kingdom. Other times we deny Your presence in our lives and fall away from our commitment to live as Your disciple. Forgive our bent towards sinning and gird us with Your strength to resist temptation. Help us to focus our eyes on You, that we might see more clearly, love You more dearly, and follow You more nearly, day by day. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.

#### **INVITATION:**

To follow Christ is not an easy task. To follow Jesus may mean going against the crowd period to follow Jesus - it may involve carrying his cross. But each step of the way, Jesus walks beside us, offering grace and forgiveness and strength.

There may be some here today who would like to take that step of faith and make a commitment to follow Jesus. You are willing to stand up and confess your faith in a Savior who died on the cross for your sins. If you're ready to confess your faith we invite you to come forward at this time and we will rejoice with you in this most important decision you will ever make.

There are others who are looking for a church home. A place where you can serve Christ and grow in faith. We invite you to come forward now to transfer your membership. We will welcome you with open arms in this particular part of the body of Christ.

And there's still maybe others who wish to rededicate your life to service in Christ's name. You may feel you have fallen away from Christ and you want to come back --- to make your commitment stronger. You're invited to come now at this time to rededicate your life to Christ. Let us all renew our faith in God as we stand and sing.