

Walking To Jerusalem
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009
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As many of you witnessed, Rio came back for a return engagement this year. The local donkey that is fated to be our “Jesus carrier” every Palm Sunday. Ok, so he’s not a “colt that has never been ridden” as Scripture says, but here in Placitas, it’s the best we can do. We convinced and begged James to put on the musty Jesus costume, and after climbing up in a short tree and slowly lowering himself onto Rio, we were as ready as possible for this annual procession into Jerusalem – or at least through the garden to the door of the church.

Everyone was waving Eco-palms this year - palms that are fair-traded and collected in an environmentally-sensitive fashion. It didn’t make any difference to Rio. He is difficult to convince to move even without the “Hosanna’s” and the green fronds being waved in his face.

Jack, Rio’s owner sighed, “Pastor, I can push this donkey, if you can lead him by his rope.” (note to self: “leading” means PULLING HARD in donkey terms). And so the procession begins. James sitting nervously on the back of Rio, Jack pushing and me pulling. I keep feeding Rio little bits of tortilla (his favorite bribe) that are smashed in my robe pocket. Finally, Rio decides that moving is in his best interest and starts down the small hill to the church. Jesus looks nervous, Rio looks fearful and I am trying not to step on the hem of my robe and fall at Jesus’ feet.

Last year, Rio got so nervous that Jesus ended up hopping off the donkey and walking into Jerusalem.

Somehow I wonder if Jesus' entrance might have been more like this - everyone yelling and waving branches, but a real reluctance on the part of those truly involved. After all, Jesus knows what is coming and trust me; donkeys pick up on that kind of emotional stuff.

Jesus is coming into Jerusalem after his greatest triumph so far – raising Lazarus from the dead. No wonder there are so many new believers on that dusty road into town. That is something that can’t be faked. News of this raising of the dead has reached the high officials and plans are already underway to take care of this troublesome Jesus and the evidence (the plot is against Lazarus too). Jesus is so aware of this – I wonder how hollow these palm waving accolades must have sounded to his ears. Perhaps the donkey senses this and stops, and perhaps Jesus dismounts and walks the rest of the way.

I see church this way sometimes: a reluctant donkey, one that is too frightened to go all the way to Jerusalem, all the way through Holy Week, all the way to the cross and beyond. It doesn’t matter how hard the Pastor pulls or what goodies she has in her pocket – or who else is pushing to keep this “donkey” moving, the noise and the confusion of what is in front of us is too overwhelming and we stall.

But Jesus doesn't stall. He gets off the donkey and goes on ahead. We stay behind – figuring this one triumph is enough, especially in these economic times (“Can't we just come to church and be comfortable?”)

We miss the tables overturned in the temple, the loving meal with friends, the betrayal in the garden...the cross on the garbage dump.

We are unable to move, we are hoping these hard times will be done soon and we can just go back to our stall and wait it out. We got close enough for Jesus to walk the rest of the way, didn't we? We stayed comfortable.

We stayed behind, we stayed where we were.

And we missed the Resurrection.

Perhaps it is time to blow all those positive thinking myths to hell. Literally. It is time to reclaim the need and the reality of lament and grief. We can't wish away life's downturns. We can't think them away. Even the man who wrote “*The Prayer of Jabez*” and taught us all how to pray our way to prosperity failed utterly when he tried to take his message to the continent of Africa, where the economic engine wasn't burning at high speed and damn near anyone could make money on Wall Street. Even “*The Secret*” ultimately fails except for those who own the rights to the book.

As it has been said, sometimes the only way out is through. All the way through Jerusalem, through our disappointments, through our grief, through our sense of abandonment, to those seemingly dead ends where the rock closes in and we are locked in tombs of despair....

Darkness – unending darkness....

Only then does the miracle happen. Only then do we find ourselves blinded by the light of the stone rolling away and the light of angels unwrapping us from our shrouds and we come forth blinking in the sunlight and we realize that we were never in that tomb alone and more importantly, there had been someone in that tomb long before us - who knows what it feels like to be dead and to live again.

We come back into the light - but it isn't the same light. It's Resurrection light. A light that dispels darkness, wipes away tears and sings in the voice of hope. A light that conquers death. An everlasting light – an ever-living light.

A Light that knows and calls us by our name...

...if we have walked through Jerusalem with Jesus. If we are not still waving aging palms outside the city gates. Amen.

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