

March 31, 2018
Easter Vigil
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 1:1-2:4a [The Story of Creation]
Genesis 7:1-5, 11-18, 8:6-18, 9:8-13 [The Flood]
Exodus 14:10-31; 15:20-21 [Israel's deliverance at the Red Sea]
Isaiah 55:1-11 [Salvation offered freely to all]
Ezekiel 37:1-14 [The valley of dry bones]
Zephaniah 3:14-20 [The gathering of God's people] (this one's new)

Psalm 114
Romans 6:3-11
Mark 16:1-8

Sunday before last—that is, the Sunday before Palm Sunday—the High School Youth Group and their leaders watched the old film version of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Because time flies, this year brings the movie's *forty-fifth* birthday.

In many ways the film has begun to show its age. I sat there thinking that the film seemed much hokier than I'd remembered, and wondering what the youth could possibly be thinking. I soon found out, as they good-naturedly—and justifiably—joked out loud about the costumes and the camp. It was fun for the youth—and eye-opening for me.

One scene particularly stood out: Jesus' "triumphal" entry into Jerusalem. On film, it looked anything but triumphal. That's mainly because there were so few people in the scene, less than two dozen. Because I wanted the youth to enjoy the film, I was actually a little embarrassed by it. I wondered why the director couldn't have hired a few more extras.

Quite surprisingly, that movie scene is still on my mind. In church, we have moved far past that biblical event. Liturgically, I should be saying, "Happy Easter!"

We have two Easter services here at St. Thomas's. Tomorrow morning we'll have the big service. We'll probably have a nice turnout of regulars, semi-regulars, and the not-so-regulars. *And* we'll probably have a number of visitors and first-timers and Christmas-and-Easter Christians. In other words, it will be a congregation that is far from a usual.

This congregation is also far from usual, but in a different way. We are the devoted few, some might say the fanatical few, who have been in church for what seems all week. We have had our own Palm Sunday procession to Jerusalem. We have been together for dips and peaks along the road from there to Maundy Thursday to Good Friday to our Easter Vigil's first "alleluia." The Choir members have barely left since Thursday at five o'clock. At this point we have had, as is said these days, *all the feels*.

We've had all the feels, and we should still be on a high note ... but we just heard a Gospel reading that ends with the word *afraid*. Seriously, is that necessary?

Apparently it is. Apparently it was necessary for Mark to *end his Gospel* with the word *afraid*. If you open a Bible you'll see two extra chunks after that, but don't be fooled. If you read the footnotes, you'll learn that the earliest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end right where we did. The resurrected Jesus makes no appearance in Mark's Gospel. There is no Road to Emmaus. There are no broiling fish.

Let's hear Mark's ending again: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Of course those women are afraid. If the living Jesus had rocked their world, the dying Jesus has turned it upside-down. Even if everything is happening just as Jesus said it would, their world is still upside-down. Because everything is happening just as Jesus said it would, their lives will never be the same. Jesus is never going back into that tomb.

As a film, *Jesus Christ Superstar* is very much a product of its age—and I am a product of the same age. It was released in 1973, and I first saw it when I was twelve years old.

Watching it the other day, my first thought was that the actors would have looked "normal" in 1973. The clothes, the hair—yikes, the hair! But then I remembered: they would have looked "normal" only to people who were okay with hippies, and many people weren't. Remembering that reminded me of the Vietnam War, the Vietnam War protests, President Nixon, Watergate. Remembering all that reminded me of the urban reality of race riots and the urban myth of bra burning. I could go on, but I think you get it.

I grew up during a time of enormous societal change. And I was fortunate to hear all of it debated between my father and my mother's father. Those debates were regular events on Sunday afternoons, after dinner at my grandparents' house. My father and grandfather would never change the other's mind about anything, and they both knew that. But they enjoyed arguing, and I learned from listening.

My father was socially progressive—though it did throw him for a loop when my sister abruptly became something of a hippie and then married one. My grandfather was, well, let's just say that he had no problem with the KKK. He vocally abhorred the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and pretty much every other social movement. He had a lot to say about those raggedy, dirty, lazy hippies. He thoroughly believed a popular slogan of the time, "America: love it or leave it."

But here's the thing. Those raggedy, dirty, lazy hippies were right about the Vietnam War. Uppity women and black people were right about the status of women and black people. And those drag queens at the Stonewall Inn ... they were right about queer people.

Sometimes it's tempting to say that we're having the same arguments now. But that would be a vast oversimplification. It's more accurate to say that we're having different arguments about the same issues. We have come a long way, even if the journey isn't over.

Back to that scene from the movie. At some point it finally occurred to me: that's probably pretty much what Jesus' so-called "triumphal" entry looked like. His core group was not much larger than twelve, it would have included men and women, and most of them would have been poor.

So, yeah, if you ignore the super-white Jesus, that movie scene of a small group of hippies probably isn't far off. And so here's the thought I've been going back to for the last two weeks, something I'm still getting my head around: somehow, a couple dozen first-century ragamuffins have led us right here, right now.

That so-called triumphal entry was an act of political theater. Jesus and his followers were mocking the way that real kings were treated—and in doing so, exposing it for the empty excess that it was. Mocking the status quo, they probably had quite a fun time.

Political theater is funny, and it's risky. Jesus, like so many protesters before and after, knew that, sometimes, it ends in death.

And sometimes it only *seems* to.

That's what we're here to celebrate tonight.

With God's help, that rag-tag group of Jesus-followers changed the world. Now, it's our turn. We may be afraid, but with God's help, we will also do just fine.

So look around at this rag-tag but devoted group of Jesus-followers. And remember, the tomb is still empty.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!