

"20/20"

PSALM 118
JOHN 12:12-16

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

THE REVEREND KELLY WIA NT

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The Palm Sunday story in John's Gospel is a stripped-down version of the event. There are no cloaks thrown upon the path. There is no sending of the disciples to fetch a donkey. Jesus simply finds a young donkey, maybe among the crowd, and rides into Jerusalem surrounded by a crowd waving palm branches and crying Hosanna. Interestingly, this is the only gospel that identifies the branches as branches of palm trees. It is also the only gospel in which the crowd cries out, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord - the King of Israel." Jesus is explicitly identified as a king. The other gospels imply it with the crowds' behavior, but John makes it clear that the crowd was welcoming a hoped-for king. It must have been a glorious moment for the disciples. Their teacher was receiving the acclaim he deserved and being treated as a conquering hero, as a king. Everything seemed so right, so in order, so clear.

Until, it wasn't. Until it all went horribly, horribly wrong. Immediately after the celebratory entry into Jerusalem, Jesus began talking about his own death. The people no longer believed in him, despite the signs and miracles performed in their presence. He gathered his disciples for a last intimate meal together and then he was arrested, beaten, betrayed, sentenced to death, and crucified. Everything spiraled downhill and out of control. All the glory of Palm Sunday unraveled before their eyes.

It wasn't until after Jesus' death and resurrection, that it all began to make sense. As our text puts it, "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him."

They say hindsight is 20/20.

A few nights ago, I was rocking and singing Cora to sleep. My wife has a lovely repertoire of popular songs and sweetly sings James Tyler, Indigo Girls, and Patsy Cline

to lull Cora into dreamland. I, on the other hand, draw only from hymns and old camp songs, which I sing lovingly but with terrible pitch. Having exhausted *Kum By Yay* (which is hard to do), *Amazing Grace*, and *Jesus Loves Me*, I drew deep from the well, and began singing *Pass It On*, which I had learned as a child at church camp.

“It only takes a spark
to get a fire going
And soon all those around,
can warm up in its glowing.
That’s how it is with God’s love,
Once you’d experienced it,
You spread his love to ev’ryone
You want to pass it on.”

As I sang, my friend, Gayle Sealy’s, face emerged in my mind. She was a year older than me and in my youth group so traveled on several work trips together. When I was maybe 14 and she 15, my parents, the youth group leaders at the time, took us to Fort Defiance on the Navajo Indian reservation, where I had grown up as a small child. The youth group stayed in the church that still holds my earliest memories of church community, nursery, and stained-glass windows.

One night shortly before lights out, I went looking for my friend, Gayle, who I realized I had not seen in a while. I found her wandering down the hallway toward me with tears in her eyes. Concerned I asked what was wrong. She said she had been in the sanctuary. She had gone in there to find some alone time. She read the Bible for a little bit and then before long, was laying on the floor in the chancel looking up at the peak of the sanctuary ceiling. All of a sudden, she was overwhelmed with warmth and love. It was so powerful, she began crying. It was God, she told me. She knew deep within her bones that God loved her and loved all of us and she wanted to shout it out, but she also wanted to lay there forever feeling that feeling..... But it faded, and she knew she needed to get ready for bed, and that we’d be looking for her. I had found her just as she was leaving the sanctuary. The experience still real and raw and beautiful.

I listened in awe, having never experienced something like that but I knew Gayle and Gayle did not lie. Plus, she was older and wiser, and I adored her. As she described the feeling of being deeply loved by God, she said she wished she could explain it to others, she wanted to tell the whole world. I said, “wait, I’ll be right back” and I ran into the sanctuary, grabbed a hymnal, opened it to *Pass It On*, and handed it to her. “Is it like this,” I asked? “Yes, yes, yes,” she said.

“I wish for you my friend
This happiness that I’ve found
You can depend on Him
It matters not where you’re bound
I’ll shout it from the mountain top
I want my world to know

The Lord of love has come to me
I want to pass it on”

Four years later, I was 17, Gayle 18 and I asked our pastor if we could sing *Pass it On* at her funeral. Gayle and her husband were murdered. They were shot in their home and then dumped in the desert far from our homes in El Paso, TX.

As I rocked Cora to sleep, it all became clear, some 30 years later. I now know that Gayle had a mystical experience, an intense experience of God which ignited in her not only deep peace, but joy and thirst for God. I had never heard of a mystic or a mystical experience until I entered seminary, where I began falling in love with the female mystics, especially Julian of Norwich and Mechthild of Magdeburg.

Gayle, before she died, at such a young age, was graced with a mystical experience. That knowledge gives me great peace for I know that Gayle had a taste of the love that now holds her forever.

I have also come to understand my role in that exchange. I was the receiver, the one honored enough to witness her joy and experience and I in turn found words from our faith tradition to help her give it voice. Now, *Pass It On* is not one of the great hymns of our faith nor is it the most beautiful of poetry but it was my natural instinct to find voice in the words of our faith.

For years people have asked me if I grew up wanting to be a pastor. “No,” I’ve said. The thought never crossed my mind until after I had graduated from college. “I had no clue,” I have confessed over and over. But hindsight, is 20/20. Yes, yes, yes. At 14, I got a taste of what it is to pastor, to be let in on people’s most profound moments, to witness to joy and sorrow, and to seek the words of our faith to give voice to that which is the most true and real in this world. I did not understand these things at the time, but now I see it so clearly.

I also understand one of the reasons I marched in DC yesterday in the March for Our Lives and why gun violence shakes me to the core, because it took my friend, Gayle.

So often we understand and see God at work only in hindsight. This, of course, is not easy because we are impatient creatures, we want to be in control, we want answers, and we want our lives to make sense in the moment. But we lack the full picture and life and faith are ever unfolding. The trick is to live as fully present in the moment as possible so that we are able to understand over time. Faith is trusting that what needs to be revealed will be revealed in time and that the truth of God is already present, even when we cannot see it.

This is not, “God makes everything happen for a reason” theology. This is a faith grounded in the word and grounded in the experience of the disciples that we will come

to understand or to see God at work even if what happened was not for a good reason or at least no good reason we can see. I believe, there is no reason ordained by God that Gayle should have died. That was sin and evil and human free will run amuck.

I have come to understand that moment in the church in Fort Defiance with Gayle differently as I have lived my life in relationship to God and have allowed God to shape me. The sting of her death will always be with me but the knowledge that Gayle experienced God, reminds me that as I proclaim at funerals, Gayle has passed into God's love and will be held there forever. There she is safe and well. Gayle was gifted with a foretaste of this glory divine when only 15.

For the disciples, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem among the throng waving palm branches was a time of exuberance, joy, and hope. It was a foreshadowing of the kingdom ushered in by Jesus, who is indeed a king. Not the king they had imagined, but a king that changed everything, a king that offered more than any conquering hero might have offered some 2000 years ago. Only after his death and resurrection, could they see that Jesus ushered in the kingdom of God and redefined power and what it means to be a disciple.

Instead of a victor's feast, they would gather around a simple table and break bread and share wine and be fed and nurtured and commune with Christ. Instead of living in luxury amidst the spoils of war, they were sent to the least and the lost. Discipleship invited them and invites us to march toward the cross, toward suffering, toward the valleys, the broken places with confidence that healing and redemption is not in displays of power, but in displays of love and compassion and mercy. In this kingdom, we are not conquerors, we do not have control, but grace is poured out upon us and God reigns.

The disciples could not see this as the donkey carrying Jesus labored towards Jerusalem. They could not see that the donkey was really carrying him to the cross, toward redemption, toward love poured out. It was only in hindsight that it all became clear and their lives and ours were changed, remade, reshaped, reclaimed, and made new.

Thankfully, they were people of faith, so when the truth of Jesus Christ and the events of Palm Sunday were revealed to them after his death and resurrection, they were able to live into their calling and into the hope of God's kingdom. It is my hope that we are able to do the same; to trust that the truth will be revealed in time and that whether we see it in the moment or not, God is present, active, and what will one day be revealed to us is already a reality.

Praise be to God. Amen.