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## *Palms, the Passion, and this Pandemic*

**A sermon by Cathy Zappa**  
**Palm Sunday – Year A**  
**via livestream**

What a morning. What a week. What a month! I don't know whether I'm coming or going, or what I should be doing—how I'm supposed to feel, or even how I'm supposed to preach today. Believe or not, this is actually my first time preaching from home on Palm Sunday in the middle of a worldwide pandemic!

This is all so new and disorienting. Every time I think I've got a grip, every time I've got a plan, there's new information, a new directive, a new circumstance, and I have to start all over again. And all the while, the losses keep piling up, and there's so much to grieve.

Like many of you, I'm sad, confused, worried, drained. Like many of you, I feel disconnected from so many of the people and places and routines in my life. And I'm sobered by the needs of those among us who are most vulnerable, or who don't have safe homes. Like many of you, I want the same mind that was in Christ Jesus to be in me, but what does that look like right now? Instead, I'm quite a mess, riding a roller coaster of moods and emotions, much to my family's chagrin.

And yet, like many of you, I'm discovering all kinds of graces too—like time with my husband and three teenagers, all together, all at once! I'm discovering grace in their boredom and the creativity it's generating, and the way it's turning us toward one another. I'm discovering grace in my newfound appreciation for things I took for granted—and my newfound freedom from things and routines that I didn't think I could live without.

I'm discovering grace in the concern and care I've seen among so many of you, for one another, and for this community, and for those who are suffering most. There is grace in the generosity and compassion pouring out all around us: in the everyday heroism of medical professionals and staff, grocery workers, delivery people, service providers, caregivers. In the everyday sacrifices of people who have quarantined themselves voluntarily for the common good—or of elders who have quarantined themselves for the sake of their worried adult children.

There's grace in the resilience of our young people as they navigate so many disappointments.

There is even grace in all the great toilet paper memes and social distance humor, like the cartoon of a man wearing a t-shirt that says in big letters, "Let's talk about Jesus," with a bubble over his head that explains, "It helps with social distancing." Yes, there is grace in being able to laugh at ourselves!

And here's what's really strange: I feel guilty about all of this! As if there were something wrong with discovering grace here, in the midst of this collective tragedy, or trauma; as if seeing the good somehow denied the bad, or diminished the suffering, the great great losses. I *do* know others are suffering so much more deeply than I am, and I feel guilty about that too.

It's a confusing jumble of emotions and experiences, isn't it? Sorrow and gratitude and fear and peace. Disappointment and hope, horror and beauty. Guilt and grace.

All of this, we bring with us to this Palm Sunday, or Passion Sunday, perhaps the most confusing, jarring, paradoxical day in the church year. We begin the morning in anticipation and joy, as we proclaim our triumphant king, Jesus: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord, hosanna in the highest!" But then the liturgy takes a somber turn, as we turn toward Jesus' passion—toward the week when everything goes awry, when the world and all our expectations get flipped upside down. Suddenly, the crowds who proclaimed this great king reject him, his friends betray and deny and abandon him, the religious and political elite

persecute him. And Jesus is arrested, tried, convicted, humiliated, and crucified.

That's where the story ends, for today at least. But we know what's coming later this week. On Thursday, we'll gather again to re-member Jesus' last supper and his command to love one another, as he loved us. Then on Friday, we'll sit at the foot of the cross, and bear witness to his crucifixion, and to the darkness and desolation and disorientation that follows. And then, finally, on Easter morning, we'll celebrate his resurrection and all that it means for us.

We sometimes treat these as distinct moments, unfolding in a neat and orderly sequence, both in Christ's life and in the church's sacred drama. And in our own lives, as well. Yet we can't really separate out the liturgies and moments and emotions of this day, this holy week, this strange time in our lives, as if there were a singular, right way to "do them"—as if each had its only and proper place—as if we didn't often experience them all at once. Death in life, and life in death.

Yes, it's messy, but so is life. So is this week. So are Judas and Peter and Pilate and Caiaphas, and the scribes and elders, and the soldiers and crowds. So are we. Oh Lord, bless this mess!

It's easy to point to all the things we may be doing wrong today, just as it's easy to point at all the things people did wrong in the passion narrative. There is plenty of guilt to go around, for sure! And there certainly is a place for honest, hard judgment—for facing the ways we all participate in the crucifixion of Christ and of others.

But this year, perhaps because of what we're living through (or fumbling our way through!), perhaps because we're doing the best we can in this strange new world, I'm drawn to a different gesture: the open arms of Jesus on the cross. Jesus isn't pointing fingers; Jesus is embracing it all, embracing us all, from the cross—holding all of our confusion and sorrow and fear and anger and hope, our sinfulness and our goodness, guilt and grace. All of it. This year, I hear Jesus saying to each of us, through his passion and on the cross, "I know you, and I love you—and will love you to the end. And I bless your mess, and am with you in it—and I *will* bring you through, with grace."