

Palm Sunday

SPEAKER Steve Hawthorne

DATE Sunday, April 13, 2025

PASSAGES John 12; Matthew 21; Luke 19; John 11; Luke 10; 1 Kings 1

MESSAGE Begins at 0:48:29 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Palm Sunday is the one day of Holy Week that gets waved through with a few palm fronds and a children's procession, and Steve Hawthorne wanted it back. It is not a triumph and it is not a parade. It is a procession of praise for a king — and the crowd was there because a man had walked out of a tomb in Bethany a few days earlier.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ “Triumphal entry” is not in the text. Nothing about that day is a victory lap; nobody has been beaten. It is a procession, and it is for the person at the center of it.
- ◆ The donkey was not chosen only for humility. Solomon rode David's royal mule up that same road to be made king. Jesus was making a claim, on the ground, in public.
- ◆ Only John says the branches were palm branches. The other gospels just say the crowds cut branches from the trees.
- ◆ The crowds came for two things: what they had seen Jesus do, and who they had heard was walking around alive. Lazarus was part of the draw.
- ◆ Martha and Mary said exactly the same sentence to Jesus and meant two different things. One was an accusation; one was grief shared with someone who was grieving too.
- ◆ Martha believed all the right doctrine and had still let go of hope for anything good in the present. Correct belief and abandoned expectancy can live in the same person.
- ◆ Jesus reversed the proverb. Not seeing is believing — “if you believe, you will see the glory of God.”

- ◆ Mary was not wasting the perfume. She had listened when Jesus said he was going to die, believed him when the disciples would not, and buried him early.

► 0:48:29

Matt Ryniker introduced Steve as a mentor — in the scriptures, in preaching, in pastoral care — and noted that a man known worldwide as Dr. Hawthorne of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement courses is, at Hope Chapel, just Steve. Steve, fussing with his lapel mic and his “antique tech stuff,” said he has been asked to preach Palm Sunday sixteen times now, and most of those sermons were different from each other.

1. It is not a triumphal entry

► 0:52:15

Steve's complaint is that Palm Sunday gets overlooked. Church signs advertise Good Friday and Easter, and then, in smaller letters, come before that too if you can. In a lot of churches the day amounts to letting the kids be rowdy with fronds. Which is nice. But we know what matters — as he put it, with the room laughing, “it's us getting died for,” and not going to the bad place, and living forever.

So what is this day? Not about us at all. It is something marvelous happening for the person at the center of it — and it is the one event besides the passion that all four gospels record. Jesus arranged what could be arranged, particularly the donkey, and the rest simply happened.

Then the heading in your Bible: *the triumphal entry*. “That's nowhere in the Bible,” Steve said. “Any hint of a triumph or a victory. Triumph means, but I win and you lose.” Empires held triumphal processions — the army marches home, the city cheers, and it is a parade. This was not that. It was a procession, and no war had been won.

2. The praise — what actually happened

► 0:56:36

The route runs about three quarters of a mile down from Bethany, down the descent of the Mount of Olives, up to the eastern gate. The city was packed for Passover, and the noise carried far enough that anyone nearby would have come to look. Jerusalem asked who this was, and the answer came back: the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.

“The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’”

JOHN 12:12-13 ↗

► 0:57:56

Two details Steve wanted noticed. That verse is the only place in scripture that says the branches were palm; elsewhere the crowds simply break branches off the trees. And the shout itself is a quotation — Psalm 118, sung every Passover, the one line in the Bible that reads “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.” What the crowd added was not in the psalm: *the King of Israel*. Luke records the same addition, and records why they were shouting.

“As he was drawing near — already on the way down the Mount of Olives — the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

LUKE 19:37-38 ↗

A multitude of disciples — not twelve. Hundreds, thousands, out of Galilee and Judea, praising God for miracles they had watched with their own eyes.

3. Why a donkey

► 1:02:32

The usual answer is humility: a lowly animal, not a warhorse, not what an emperor would ride. True as far as it goes, Steve said, but it is not the whole claim. The king Israel was waiting for was the son of David — and David gave an instruction about how his own son would be made king.

“Take with you the servants of your lord and have Solomon my son ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon.” ... And all the people went up after him, playing on pipes, and rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise.

1 KINGS 1:33-40 ↗

A royal mule, a crowd going up behind, noise loud enough to shake the ground, and a shout of long live the king. For Jesus to ride that same road a thousand years later was a statement, and Steve took some

care over the detail that no one had ever ridden this colt — nobody was going to mistake it for the neighbor's animal.

4. The preparation — what gathered the crowds

► 1:06:39

Here the message turned back a few days, because John says plainly that the crowd came not on account of Jesus only but to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. As Steve put it: wouldn't you go see the dead man walking?

He introduced the household first — Mary, Martha, and their younger brother, with means enough to host a long funeral and a banquet, which reads like an inheritance from a father already gone. And the room already knows Martha from Luke: distracted with much serving, bursting in on a sister who was sitting at Jesus' feet listening.

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her.”

LUKE 10:41-42 ↗

“Martha, Martha,” Steve said — the name twice, because he loved her too. Choose the good portion. If you have to leave early, choose to listen to Jesus.

► 1:11:02

Then the sickness. The sisters sent word — “Lord, he whom you love is ill” — and Jesus, more than a day's walk away, stayed two days longer. He told the disciples the illness was not unto death but for the glory of God, and that he was glad, for their sakes, that he had not been there, so that they might believe. Steve pressed the obvious objection: does God use illness like that? What is being asked for here is not that a sick man recover. It is trust that God will do something altogether glorious — not fix, not repair, but bring about something better than there was before.

5. Two women, one sentence

► 1:17:06

Bri Shapy read a long dramatized retelling of the walk to the tomb, and it carried the weight of the morning. Martha, head down on the narrow road, striding out ahead of the funeral guests without knowing what she meant to say. Then the words she had been holding: “Lord, if you had been here, my

brother would not have died.” The reading was blunt about what they were — “she swung them through the air like a weapon, an accusation. And that's exactly what she had meant them to be.”

She followed it with something respectable about God always being in control, and when Jesus said her brother would rise again, she gave the correct answer about the last day. Steve's point is the one worth carrying home: she believed everything true about him — Messiah, sent from God, resurrection coming — and she had still abandoned hope. “The molten fury of grief was hardening into a blank bitter despair.” No more expecting Jesus to do good things in the here and now.

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

JOHN 11:25-26 ↗

► 1:29:07

Mary said the identical sentence and meant something else entirely. She fell at his feet weeping, and she was weeping *with* him — she knew Jesus had loved Lazarus and had lost him too. Her grief put his love on display, and the onlookers who had been muttering that he should have prevented this saw it: look how he loved him. Jesus wept, and Steve noted the Greek uses a different, deeper word for what Jesus did than for ordinary weeping. He was also angry — something stirred way down inside at the whole business of death.

That is where the honest question sits, and Steve did not dodge it. Hope has had funerals recently, good people who meant something. If God is loving and also all-powerful, why doesn't he just make people better? Why is there grief at all?

6. Believing to see

► 1:33:21

At the tomb Martha objects — four days, the stench, the guests. And Jesus answers her with the sentence the whole message hangs on.

“Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?”

JOHN 11:40 ↗

We say seeing is believing. Jesus turns it around. Believing is not assent to correct facts here; it is expectancy — actually hoping God will do something.

► 1:35:24

Then Jesus looks up and prays: “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” Past tense, before he has said anything aloud — because, Steve argued, he had been praying for days. The words at the tomb were for the crowd, so they would know this was God at work and not a miracle worker doing tricks. “Prayer doesn't work. There's not a prayer that works. It's God at work.” And Jesus never did anything ordinary people could not follow him into — Peter got out of the boat too. Then: Lazarus, come out.

7. The dinner, and what Mary understood

► 1:40:00

Six days before the Passover they threw a dinner. Martha served, of course. Lazarus was at the table. And Mary brought a pound of pure nard and poured it on his feet and wiped them with her hair — a fortune, gone in a moment. Judas objected that it should have been sold for the poor, and John tells us why he really said it.

“Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

JOHN 12:7-8 ↗

The line about the poor is a quotation from [Deuteronomy 15:11](#), and Steve was firm that it does not mean the poor do not matter — the whole passage commands generosity to them. It means this was something else. Mary had been listening. Jesus had told the others he was about to be killed, this Passover, and they refused it. She believed him, and she anointed his body for burial while he could still feel it. [She has done a beautiful thing to me.](#)

8. The hope of glory

► 1:45:00

Steve brought it back to the losses in the room — the accidents, the cancer, the grim news of war. God is not running us through a test to see how we come out. He puts his heart with ours and weeps alongside us, and what he is after is not that everybody gets a pleasant life.

And that is why Palm Sunday cannot be shrunk to admiration. Jesus did not come to be a life coach or a teacher we learn a great deal from. We ought to be good and faithful people like him, Steve said — “but we can't do that. You never can find it.” The way it becomes possible is that his life is joined to ours. His

death becomes your death, because what is wrong with you cannot be repaired and has to be killed, and none of us survives our own death on our own. Then his life becomes your life.

Easter, then, is not mainly about going to heaven when we die. It is that the living one has a life he can share with anyone who comes to him. Believe him — as Steve prayed at the end, we would like to see it all clearly first and then believe, but he has already made himself trustworthy. Follow him as a king and not just a teacher.

Around the service

Earlier, telling a story before the children were released, one of the pastors described a Palm Sunday twenty years ago at an amphitheater beside the Garden of Gethsemane. Told to go apart and pray, he lay face down in the grass — and, having grown up on a farm, knew immediately he was in stinging nettle. He was already committed, so he stayed. He got up weeping, because with his face stinging and broken out he was thinking about how much more Jesus would go through that week to save us.

Kathy Tuchek prayed [Psalm 145](#) over a congregation she knew was split that morning between rejoicing and quiet financial fear, asking that the Lord who upholds all who are falling would raise up whoever was bowed down. Matt encouraged the church toward Good Friday and Easter, and toward the easiest outreach there is: come early and talk to the guests, who are already in the building and already warm to the idea.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Psalm 145:8–19
- Matthew 21:10–11
- John 12:12–13
- Psalm 118:25–26
- Luke 19:37–38
- 1 Kings 1:33–40
- Luke 19:30
- John 12:9
- Luke 10:41–42
- John 11:3
- John 11:14–15
- John 11:25–26
- John 11:35
- John 11:40
- John 11:41–42
- John 12:7–8
- Deuteronomy 15:11
- Mark 14:6

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Steve says Palm Sunday is a procession, not a triumph — something marvelous happening for Jesus rather than for us. How does that change what you are celebrating this week?
2. Martha believed every correct thing about Jesus and had still stopped expecting anything good in the present. Where has that quietly happened in you?
3. The two sisters said the same sentence and meant opposite things. Which one is closer to what you would say to Jesus about your own loss?
4. “If you believe, you will see the glory of God.” What would it look like this week to hope for something glorious rather than merely for things to be repaired?
5. Mary spent a fortune on a burial nobody else believed was coming. What is one costly, unreasonable-looking act of devotion you could actually do before Easter?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Steve Hawthorne is a friend of Hope Chapel and a mentor to senior pastor Matt Ryniker in the scriptures, in preaching and in pastoral care. He is known worldwide as Dr. Hawthorne of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement courses, which Matt described as fruitful all over the world. Steve has been asked to preach on Palm Sunday sixteen times, and says most of those messages have been different from one another.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONPvIU4tgc&t=2909s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.