



Holy Week and Easter

God's Triumph

Note for leaders about this extended guide:

As many small groups do not meet on Easter Sunday, this guide is designed to be used flexibly. If you do meet both Palm Sunday and Easter, there are enough components, and the components are slightly more involved, so they will easily extend over two weeks. When relevant, the stories have been split into two sections, should you wish to use this guide over two weeks.

The Point:

We can celebrate Jesus, the crucified and risen king. The crowds shouted, “Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David,” as they approached Jerusalem with Jesus. David was a mighty warrior and they surely expected God’s triumph to include military victory. Instead God’s triumph would look very different, being accomplished with sacrifice, suffering, death on the cross, and resurrection on Easter.

About the Story

The people of Israel had been waiting for a messiah. The specific understanding of what that messiah would do or who they would be had changed throughout the history of Israel, but the prophecies of Zechariah, Daniel and others were still ringing in people’s hearts. With Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, the momentum of the narrative moves us towards Jesus’ trial and death. Jesus was preparing his followers for a new thing when it came to God’s kingdom. Jesus made it clear he was the Messiah—but maybe not in the way they wanted him to be.

The Triumphal Entry (Mark 11:1-11)

We begin the lesson for today by going back to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. The past few weeks, we followed along as Jesus continued to challenge and be challenged by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Many of them were upset that Jesus or his followers were not following strict, human-made understandings of the law. They were additionally upset that Jesus often challenged their authority through his ministry.

Before any of those challenges arose, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, where he was greeted by a large throng of people chanting “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” and laying their cloaks and branches from nearby trees before his path. “Hosanna” comes from the Hebrew word “to save” or “deliver” and was used as a joyful exclamation of God’s deliverance.

The pilgrims who were celebrating Jesus’ entry Jerusalem were absolutely correct that Jesus was the Messiah who would deliver the people. However, they likely expected the Messiah to free them from Roman occupation. The crowd’s expectations likely added to the fears of the religious leaders who were probably afraid that the Roman authorities would retaliate with force. One can

see why the religious leaders would challenge Jesus. And when Jesus did not live up to the crowd's expectations of who the Messiah should be, one can also begin to see why their chants of "Hosanna!" became "Crucify him!" just a few chapters later (Mark 15:6-15).

The Crucifixion (Mark 15:16-39)

Mark's description of the crucifixion is the shortest of the four Gospels, but it is full of dramatic irony. The soldiers, like the crowd, did not understand who the Messiah was supposed to be, so they mocked Jesus by making a crown of thorns for him to wear adorning him in a purple cloak (the color of royalty), and saluting him as the "King of the Jews." Even the religious leaders gathered around the crucified Jesus, mocking him by saying "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe" (Mark 15:32). When Jesus finally died, the crowds disperse. But Mark shows us that no one gathered that day understood who Jesus was or what his death would lead to.

With these stories, we move into Holy Week and prepare to live in the events of Jesus' last days. But even as the passages this week are a combination of solemn preparation and dynamic celebration, we know Holy Week leads into Easter Sunday, where we once again join with those who are in awe at the empty tomb, and later to the ascension of Jesus.

Easter and the Empty Tomb (Mark 16:1-8)

The narrative continues with a group of women heading to Jesus' tomb to anoint him with spices, as was the custom for a recently deceased body. When they arrived, they discovered that the tomb was empty, and a young man told them that Jesus was raised and they should return to the disciples and tell them all that had happened.

Who Is the Messiah?

This lesson is about identifying our expectations of who Jesus is and how we expect Jesus to act. It is also about preparing to witness the kind of messiah Jesus really is, not the kind of messiah we want him to be. Where do our expectations of Jesus need to be challenged?

In God's kingdom, we are to live out our love for God and for each other. Jesus' speech and actions in the Gospels give us glimpses of that kingdom in which sickness and death are no more (Mark 1:21-45), sins are forgiven (Mark 2:1-12), the outcasts are welcomed (Mark 2:13-17), the hungry are fed (Mark 6:30-44), and so on. God's kingdom is both already here in the work of the Spirit through God's people, and still to come (Mark 13). And that is good news!

Last Week/ Next Week

Last week, Jesus taught his disciples that no matter how impressive the Jerusalem temple is it will be destroyed and tells his disciples to keep watch for the coming of the Son of Man. In today's reading, Jesus enters into Jerusalem while the crowds sing his praises, only to be crucified and buried a few days later. The story does not end with his death, as the women discover when they find his tomb empty. Next week, the disciples meet the risen Jesus in Jerusalem.

Opening Prayer

God who makes all things new, as we journey with Jesus through Holy Week, we share in the triumph and sorrow, the joy and heartbreak. At the center of this story is your Son, Jesus, the Messiah, whose death and resurrection changed the world forever. Work through us to share the good news, changing hearts as we, ourselves, have been transformed. We pray this in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Into the Story

Go around the room and answer the following questions. If splitting this into two lessons, answer the question about rituals the first week and the question about expectations the second.

What meaningful rituals that set people apart or celebrate someone's achievement have you been part of? (Think about graduation ceremonies, services of ordination, coronation parades, etc.)

- What makes these events powerful?
- When have you had expectations of someone that have to change based on time and experience?
- How did you respond?

Learning the Story

Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a colt as people spread their cloaks on the road, wave leafy branches, and shout "Hosanna!" We skip ahead to Jesus' death by crucifixion, as the soldiers and religious leaders mock him. The story ends when the women discover tomb is empty: Jesus has risen!

Bible Nuts & Bolts: The Importance of Understanding Context

The books of the Bible were written in specific time periods in specific cultures. The biblical writers wrote for an audience that shared their knowledge of the culture and customs of the day. We live nearly 2,000 years after the most recent biblical text was written, so it is important to try to understand the Bible in its original context to better understand the message. Even when understanding the Bible in its original context, our own context influences how we read the Bible. For instance, a person in a country experiencing a famine likely understands the promise in the depiction of the kingdom of heaven as a grand feast differently than someone who never has had to go to bed hungry.

Bible Connections

- ✝ At the point of death Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1.
- ✝ An account of women finding an empty tomb on the first day of the week is found in the other three Gospels, in addition to Mark: Matthew 28:1-10, Luke 24:1-11, and John 20:1-10.
- ✝ Paul includes the "Christ Hymn" in his letter to the Philippians which talks of Jesus death and exaltation (Philippians 2:5-11).

Read Mark 11:1-11 – The Triumphal Entry

- ❓ What stands out to you about the instructions Jesus gave his disciples? What questions do you think they might have had?
- ❓ Have you ever been given instructions you did not understand? How did you answer the question, "Why are you doing this?"
- ❓ What do you notice about the proclamation of the crowds (verses 9-10)? What do you think the people were expecting from Jesus at that time?
- ❓ If Jesus rode into town today, what would we be shouting about him?

Read Mark 15:16-32 – The Soldiers and Religious Leaders Mock Jesus

- ❓ Why did Jesus go so quickly from being celebrated in Mark 11 to being derided, mocked, and eventually crucified in Mark 15? What do you think is the motivation of the soldiers, religious leaders, and the on lookers?
- ❓ Mark 15:32 states that those who were being crucified alongside Jesus were also mocking him. Why do you think that was?

Note: Break here if you are splitting this lesson into two weeks.

Read Mark 15:33-39 – The Crucifixion

- ❓ What do you think Jesus means in verse 35? Did he actually believe God had forsaken him? Why or why not?
- ❓ What do you think motivated the centurion soldier to proclaim that Jesus is God's Son in verse 39?
- ❓ Read verses 40-41. Why were the women looking on from a distance? If you were among them, what do you think they would be saying? What would you be saying?

Read Mark 16:1-8 – The Empty Tomb

- ❓ What would you think if you found the tomb of a loved one apparently desecrated and empty? How would you react?
- ❓ What do you make of the young man's message? Who do you think he is?
- ❓ What emotions does the text say the women have in verse 8? What emotions would you be feeling?
- ❓ Most scholars think that verse 8 is where the Gospel of Mark originally ended, and verses 9-20 were added at a later point. Why do you think the author would have chosen to end the Gospel at verse 8?

Living the Story: Worship

Much of the stories leading up to and including the crucifixion deal with people's expectations about who the Messiah is being confronted by who Jesus, the true Messiah, actually is. On the brown construction strip of paper, write "Hosanna! Blessed is the Messiah, the one who _____." Give everyone a piece of green construction paper. On your piece of construction paper, fill in the blank with who you think the Messiah is (for example, you could write, "[the one who] saves us from our sins" or "[the one who] brings peace to the world!"). When everyone has finished writing on their strip, tape them to the brown strip on either side, making a palm branch. Then, read together, as a prayer, all the descriptions! "Hosanna! Blessed is the Messiah, the one who saves us from our sins!" "Hosanna! Blessed is the Messiah, the one who brings peace to the world!" etc. Feel free to use extra time to discuss your answers. *Note: If splitting this into two weeks, make the palm branch the first week, then read together the answers as a prayer the second week, using extra time to discuss the answers.*

Living the Story Supplies

- ✚ Green construction paper cut into strips (at least one strip per person in your group)
- ✚ Markers or other writing utensils that will be seen against the green paper
- ✚ One long strip of brown construction paper (can be two strips taped together)
- ✚ Tape

Closing Prayer

In pairs or trios, make the sign of the cross on each other's forehead or hand with olive oil (or water, if you choose) saying, "Child of God, you are set apart for the work of God."

Say this prayer or one like it as you end your time together: Gracious God, in Jesus you sent a savior and deliverer who challenged our expectations, and you've anointed us as your children. Help us to stay open to who Christ is in our midst, not who we expect or hope Christ is. Help us to continually cry out for salvation, even as we gratefully receive the gift of salvation given through Christ. Amen.

At Home

- ✝ Spend some time this week in reflection on who you think the Messiah is. In what ways does Mark's Gospel challenge your answer, and in what ways does it support it?
- ✝ Spring coincides with Easter in the northern hemisphere. Take time this week to look at how resurrection is mirrored in nature, such as in the form of budding plant life.
- ✝ Consider going to Holy Week services. If your church does not offer them, visit a local church that does. Many churches offer Stations of the Cross, which allow you to reflect on Jesus' crucifixion through art and story.

Daily Readings: Week 1

Sunday – Read Mark 11:1-11; 14:3-9

Jesus enters Jerusalem, praised by the crowds around him. He then is anointed by one of his followers. Take some water or olive oil and put it on your thumb, then anoint your forehead making the sign of the cross.

Monday – Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11

The law instructs us to care for the poor. Donate some canned items to a local food pantry.

Tuesday – Read Mark 14:10-21

Judas plots to kill Jesus. What do you think Judas' motivation was?

Wednesday – Read Mark 14:22-31

Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper while celebrating the Passover with his disciples. Pray for all experiencing hunger and poverty.

Thursday – Read Mark 14:32-42

Jesus prays in Gethsemane. What does Jesus mean by "remove this cup from me?"

Friday – Read Mark 15:16-39

Jesus is crucified. Sing the hymn "Were You There?" or prayerfully read through the lyrics.

Saturday – Read Mark 15:40-47

Jesus is buried. How do you think the disciples felt on the day between Jesus' death and resurrection?

Daily Readings: Week 2

Sunday – Read Mark 16:1-8

A group of women discover the tomb is empty! Write “Alleluia! He is risen!” on a piece of paper and display it prominently in your house.

Monday – Read John 20:1-10

John tells a slightly different version of Jesus’ resurrection. Pray for all who have recently lost a loved one.

Tuesday – Read John 20:11-18

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene. Why do you think Mary does not recognize Jesus right away?

Wednesday – Read Luke 24:13-27

Two disciples encounter a strange man on the road to Emmaus. Pray for all who are oppressed.

Thursday – Read Luke 24:28-35

The man is revealed to be Jesus! Why do you think it was in the teaching of scripture and breaking of bread that the man was revealed to be Jesus?

Friday – Read Luke 24:36-49

Jesus appears to all the disciples. Say a prayer of thanksgiving for all that God has done!

Saturday – Read Matthew 28:16-20

Jesus commissions the disciples to spread the good news! Invite someone to church with you tomorrow.