

## Palms or Passion?

You can learn a lot from riding in a hearse. Not in the back, but in the passenger's seat, next to a funeral director. During a trip to Holly Memorial Gardens in February, a funeral director and I got to talking about the recent trend away from the traditional arrangements.

He told me that almost half of their business is now what they call "direct cremation." That's when the body is cremated as soon as legally possible – usually without any visitation, often without any memorial service, and sometimes even without an obituary.

Sometimes it's to respect the wishes of the person who died, who didn't "want any fuss" or insisted that "If they didn't come to see me while I was alive, I don't want them coming to see me when I'm dead." Sometimes it's to save money – or there is no money. Sometimes it's to save time and the bother.

I fear that a lot of the time it's to avoid the painful emotions – or to spare someone we love the painful emotions. Unfortunately, you can run from grief but you cannot hide.

Missing the difficult work of grief – for whatever reason – hurts us in the end. We have all heard the overused word "closure" – but that's what our funeral traditions give us.

There is nothing like being confronted with the body of someone we love to drive home the point that he or she is gone. All four of my aunts and uncles who have died in the past two years had requested direct cremation – so we went to four memorial services. They were all devoted followers of Jesus, so we celebrated their lives and their faith, knowing where they will spend eternity. But because we would see them only a few days every year or every few years, NOT seeing them was the norm – so without confronting their physical death face-to-face, we have struggled to get our heads and hearts around the fact that they are gone from us.

Their deaths seem abstract, not concrete.

Psychologists tell us we must go through the grieving process – or else those emotions will come back to bite us later as anger or depression. But the rituals we go through help us move through that grieving process. Just as the special services of Holy Week are designed to move us through our grief over our sin and Jesus' death.

But I am seeing the same trend during Holy Week that I see in the funeral business. Churches will have a good crowd on Palm Sunday and a huge crowd on Easter. In between, we used to have decent crowds on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

One year, the churches in and around Neffs arranged for a special service every evening of Holy Week, plus a three-hour service on Good Friday and the two-and-a-half-hour Easter Vigil on Saturday evening. My first Good Friday as pastor at Kirkwood, we hosted a community service. Nine pastors and more than 60 people turned out. Sure, that was a fraction of what those churches would see on Easter, but it was still respectable.

Two years ago, eight people came to the Good Friday community service – including the organist and me. We didn't even bother last year. This year, the Lutherans are hosting Good Friday, and I hope it will rebound.

Holy Week certainly creates some time issues. Stores and offices are open, kids are in school – at least through Thursday. The world doesn't stop or even slow down for Holy Week. But we should.

Whatever the obstacles, we must find a way to do the difficult work of Holy Week – and not hop directly from Palm Sunday to Easter. If we don't take time to remember Jesus' Passion and death, then there is a disconnect in the series of events – like starting to watch a new TV series with the third or fourth episode. Our Easter

celebration is then disconnected from the painful reality that made it necessary. We may come out to celebrate Jesus' victory over death – but we have missed the struggle that preceded it.

Joyce Berger writes in an editorial in Reformed Worship magazine: "... you cannot resurrect something that hasn't first died. Without the death, there is nothing to celebrate."

I did not celebrate the outcome of the last Super Bowl – but I understand that the sweetest joy was in watching the Patriots come back from a 28-3 deficit halfway through the third period. If all you saw was James White's two-yard touchdown run – without knowing that they were in overtime because New England tied the game in the final minute of regulation – you might have said to yourself, "Ho-hum, the Pats won again." But when you know the struggle, the victory is so much sweeter. The joy is in the overcoming, isn't it?

Because Jesus was dead – really dead, truly dead – His victory was so much sweeter and our celebration is so much more meaningful. The joy is in the overcoming, isn't it?

For almost 60 years, Passion Sunday has been the same day as Palm Sunday in the Roman Catholic tradition. Now, many Christians – including those in our denomination – consider today to be Passion Sunday as well as Palm Sunday.

The reason? It's a liturgical speed bump to remind us to take a long, slow walk through Holy Week – to accompany our Lord through His Passion – instead of racing to the celebration of Easter.

We did not cast off our Palm Sunday traditions today, because they set the stage for Jesus' Passion and death. But the Gospel reading today was deliberately chosen because it tells the story of the palms and the children and the donkey, then launches us into the Passion.

Jesus was about to enter Jerusalem in triumph. His followers cheered and shouted His praises. People lined the dusty road with their cloaks and waved palm branches. But as He approached the city, Jesus knew what lay ahead of Him. He knew He would be rejected by the people, falsely accused by the religious leadership, acquitted yet condemned by a governor who caved in the face of public criticism, mocked and tortured by soldiers, then nailed to a cross and left to die. The worst to come was the sense of abandonment by His Father just before His death.

So He stopped the little parade and wept – but not for Himself. He wept for the people of the city who would have a chance to embrace Him as their Messiah, but would pass up the opportunity. He wept because He knew that about 40 years later, the Roman army would sack the city and blood would flow in the streets.

That was the beginning of the hard work of Holy Week for Jesus. Could He have passed over all the anguish and heartache? Could He have leapfrogged over the conflict with the religious elite, the Last Supper, the agony in the garden, the betrayal by Judas, the arrest, the trial, and the crucifixion?

Remember that is what Satan tempted Him to do while they were together in the wilderness before Jesus' ministry began. Satan tried to get Jesus to skip the hard work and grief of Holy Week. But Jesus could not and would not, because our salvation depended upon His doing the hard work.

Then His detractors encouraged Him to save Himself and come down from the cross. Again, Jesus could not and would not avoid the hard work of Holy Week – because it was essential to our salvation.

That is why Easter is so glorious. The joy is in the overcoming, isn't it?

Ultimately, the joy and glory of Easter lose some of their brilliance when we don't do the hard work of Holy Week. A candle in a lighted room is barely noticeable – but in a dark room, it shines like a beacon. The contrast makes it seem brighter.

So it is with Easter. If Easter is just a nice holiday after an ordinary week, it doesn't seem to shine very brightly – but after accompanying Jesus through the mental, physical, and spiritual anguish of the garden, walking up the hill of Calvary with Him, hearing Him cry, "It is finished!", and carrying His lifeless body into the tomb, Easter shines like a lighthouse in thick fog. Or the light, bursting out of the tomb.

Do we dare to rob Easter of its full glory, by failing to do the hard work of Holy Week?

None of us can make all the special services at particular times, but we can make at least one somewhere. The Messiah in the Passover tonight. Or "He's Alive" at the Capitol Theatre. Or Tenebrae on Tuesday. Or the Vigil of the Hours on Maundy Thursday. We can visit a Catholic Church for the Stations of the Cross on Friday. Or hear again the Seven Last Words of Our Lord on Friday evening. Or attend an Easter Vigil on Saturday evening – starting in darkness and ending in celebration.

The Resurrection of Jesus at Easter changed the world. But it would never have happened had He not done the hard work of Holy Week.

Your Easter celebration will be so much more joyful if you confront the sadness and ugliness of Jesus' Passion and death, and so much more meaningful if you do the hard work of Holy Week. Amen.