INTRODUCTION

When we remember Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem one week before Easter, we always think of waving palm branches. That idea is reinforced for us every year when we buy palm branches and have the kids walk around the sanctuary waving them. Did you know, however, that of the four gospels, John is the only one that specifically speaks of palm branches? The Gospel of Matthew says only branches, the Gospel of Mark says leafy branches, and the Gospel of Luke, which Lucki read for us today, doesn’t refer to branches at all. Bible scholars tell us that when we compare the four gospels in this manner, we can learn from their similarities and differences what was important to them. When we see what they included or left out of the story, we can find the meaning that that particular gospel writer wanted to convey.

Today, as we focus our attention on Luke’s version of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, we see another factor that’s a little different. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all three indicate that Jesus told his disciples to go find a colt that was tied up and to untie it, but Luke is the only one who belabors this point. In his version of the story, Luke repeatedly mentions untying the colt. This fourfold repetition is a signal to us readers that Luke thinks untying the colt was a significant part of this event. So our interpretive task is to figure out what untying the colt meant to Luke and what it means for us today.

1—TRUSTING IN JESUS

The story begins with Jesus’ instruction to his disciples. In that instruction, we see that that the first meaning of untying the colt is trusting in Jesus. With divine foreknowledge, or at least some very good advance planning, Jesus already knew where the colt was, who owned it, and that the owners would allow the disciples to borrow the animal. Jesus’ certainty inspired the disciples to trust him and
to obey his instruction. The disciples were able to follow through because they believed that Jesus knew what he was doing. They trusted his competence. They trusted his motives. They trusted his purpose.

The disciples would have had to trust Jesus a lot to do what he asked of them. Because Jesus told them to untie the colt first and answer questions second, this act of obedience might have felt like theft. I’m sure they weren’t accustomed to helping themselves to other people’s livestock. But, after three years of following Jesus, the disciples knew him well enough to know that their Lord and teacher wasn’t asking them to do something wrong or evil. Jesus wasn’t an ends-justify-the-means sort of guy. Jesus wouldn’t put them up to criminal activity. This had to be something that Jesus had thought through carefully. This had to be something that Jesus knew would be OK to do.

And neither was Jesus one to cry wolf. When Jesus said he needed the colt, the disciples could trust that Jesus truly did need it. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said that, if anyone questioned them, they were to say that “the Lord needs it and will send it back immediately.” That’s an assurance that Jesus and his disciples would be responsible borrowers. But, here in Luke, there’s no mention of the animal’s return. There’s no question or doubt that Jesus would do what was right and fair. Since the simple statement, “The Lord needs it,” was all that the owners required, then they too must have been people who were willing to believe and trust in Jesus.

When Jesus calls us to do something different, something unfamiliar, something potentially hazardous or costly, it’s quite possible that we might hesitate. When Jesus asks us to stretch into a different way of thinking or acting, we might find it uncomfortable at first.

That’s certainly the way it was for me to become a preacher. Getting up in front of people and making speeches wasn’t something that came easily to me. When I was a kid in elementary and junior high school, even giving a book report in front of the class was enough to make my voice quiver and my heart pound. As I made my way back to my desk, the other kids would whisper to me, “Do you know that your neck is all red?” My very reddened neck clearly signaled to my classmates the terrified
emotions I was feeling. Fortunately, for the most part, I’ve overcome that terror of public speaking by
trusting in Jesus. I’ve put my faith in his good purpose that this preaching I do is important. Despite my
own hesitations and concerns, I trust that Jesus knew what he was doing when he placed his call upon
my life. If Jesus needs my service, then, despite my reservations and fears, I will do as he has asked of
me.

Not all of us are called to preach, but every Christian is called to serve Christ with the spiritual
gifts, talents, and opportunities that God has given. Abegail Faz is going to play her trumpet for us
during the offertory today. I’m sure you can appreciate that that’s no easy thing to do. So, what is
Christ asking of you? Where is Jesus asking you to stretch and grow? What does Jesus need you to do?
How is Jesus asking you to trust in him? What does untying the colt mean for you?

2—MAKING A TRANSITION

A second meaning of untying the colt has to do with making a transition. Maybe Luke’s original
readers understood this better than we do. When they read this story of Jesus sending the disciples to
untie the colt, they probably recalled passages from the Old Testament. For the Jewish people, those
were their holy scriptures and their primary literature and entertainment. They didn’t have stories from
comic books and movies; they didn’t have Walt Disney and Steven Spielberg; but they certainly did have
the Patriarchs, Kings, and Prophets.

From that religious and cultural tradition, those first readers of Luke’s gospel would have
remembered that the image of a tied-up colt was part of an ancient blessing that the elderly patriarch
Jacob had conferred upon his son Judah. As that blessing was passed from father to son, so it would be
passed down throughout the tribe of Judah for generations.1 Similarly, Luke’s original readers would
have recalled the Old Testament story in which, just before he died, King David called his priest and
prophets close to him and told them to put his son Solomon on David’s own mule, lead him into
Jerusalem, and anoint Solomon as the new king of Judah.2 Along with those important generational
transitions, Luke’s first readers might have also recalled the prophecy of Zechariah, who envisioned a time when Jerusalem would see a triumphant king riding “on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” This victorious and humble king would lead a transition away from war horses, chariots, and battle bows and toward peace for the nations, a peace that would extend “from sea to sea” and “to the ends of the earth.”

Do you see how the first readers of Luke’s gospel would have understood his meaning? By highlighting the part about untying the colt, Luke was emphasizing the meaning of making a transition. By writing the story this way, Luke was underscoring that it was time for the royal mantle to be passed. It was time for long-held power to be transferred. It was time not only for Roman military occupation to come to an end, but also for the priestly class in Jerusalem to loosen their grip on the religious life of the people. Jesus and his disciples who wandered through Galilee, along with John the Baptist and his disciples who hung out along the Jordan River, were like the fermentation and expansion of new wine that couldn’t be contained in old, stiff wineskins. The Judaism of their fathers’ generation seemed too rigid and stodgy, too judgmental and harsh. It was time to break free of the old patterns and inaugurate a new kingdom that offered mercy for the sinner, love for the outcast, healing for the sick, and salvation for all.

By his fourfold repetition of untying the colt, Luke was saying, “We’re in a new time; and a new leader, with new values and purpose, is ready to take charge. As King Jesus makes his humble and triumphal entry, we’re moving from a time of war to a time of peace.” As events later in the week would show, the old guard wasn’t ready to let loose of their power. But, just because the Jewish and Roman leaders refused to move over and let the Prince of Peace take his rightful place didn’t mean that they could stop the change that God had set in motion. Whether the current leaders liked it or not, whether they were ready for it or not, whether they would accept it or fight against it, transition was
coming. As the resurrection of Jesus would soon prove, the old was passing away; the new was entering into their midst.

So, today, as we interpret this scripture and hear it’s meaning for the early Christians, we have to ask ourselves, “What transition is occurring for us?” Are we still bound to the past, or are we willing to untie some knots and free ourselves for the new things God has in store for us? As change inevitably comes, are we going to stand on the side of resistance or on the side of acceptance? Will we fight and war against the changes that threaten the status quo, or will we peaceably embrace this new thing that God is doing in our midst? In our personal lives, in our families, in our church, and in our society, how will we untie the colt of the past and welcome the new kingdom that Jesus is bringing?

**CONCLUSION**

I came across a great sermon on the internet this week. Jim Wallis of the Sojourners community preached about the deep-seated problem of racism in our country. Walls said the time is right for us to let loose of our historic white privilege and adopt a new ethic that all races matter. Wallis quoted the Rev. Desmond Tutu of South Africa who said that we Christians need to embrace a “spirituality of transformation.”

Yesterday, five of us from our church attended the United Methodist Subdistrict Conference in Salt Lake City. A couple of the guest speakers talked to us about how God is calling us to take some steps of trust and transition into some new kinds of ministry.

There are many ways we could apply today’s scripture. What’s important for us to realize is that, in his gospel telling of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Luke doesn’t focus his attention on waving palm branches. What Luke cares about is trusting Jesus and making a transition. So, on this Sunday before Easter, let’s do what Jesus asked of his disciples. Let’s get busy untying the colt.

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1Genesis 49:10-11.  
21 Kings 1:33-37.  
3Zechariah 9:9-10.  
4https://sojo.net/articles/joy-comes-morning