

Palms and passion

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

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It is tempting to think of the Upper Room scene in the Gospels' passion narratives as a dreamy, candle-lit fellowship meal rather than, as [Ched Myers](#) has said, "the conflict-ridden final hours of a fugitive community in hiding."

Likewise it's easy to interpret Jesus' experience in Gethsemane as calm, resolute submission to a pre-ordained plan instead of the deep, sweaty struggle of a man coming to terms with his revolutionary calling.

On the Sunday before Easter, churches often follow "The Liturgy of the Palms" with "The Liturgy of the Passion." This choice is usually made when a church won't be holding Holy Week services or, more conspiratorially, when turnout is expected to be low on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Going from the high of Palm Sunday to the high of Easter is, as seasoned pastors know, to cheat and be cheated.

That we call these long, dense narratives "liturgies" reminds us that when we read and hear them we are not innocent bystanders—we are implicated in the stories; we have "work" to do in them. We are the crowd along the streets of Jerusalem shouting, "Hosanna! Hosanna!" and we are the same mob on Good Friday screaming, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" As [Fleming Rutledge](#) has noted, "the liturgy of Palm Sunday is set up to show you how you can say one thing one minute and its opposite the next. This is the nature of the sinful human being."

In looking at the cruxifixion, Rutledge also says this:

What we see and hear in Jesus' death is not just his solidarity with the victims of this world. It is that, but it is not only that. What we see and hear in the Cry of Dereliction is Jesus' identification in his Cross *not only* with the innocent victims of this world *but also* with their torturers . . . What Jesus assumes on the Cross is *not only* the suffering of innocents *but also* the wickedness of those who inflict suffering.

And when Jesus says, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” ([Luke 23:34](#)), “he makes himself one, not only with my *pain* but with my *sin*—because I myself, and you yourselves, and all of us ourselves, are *sometimes victims* of others and *sometimes torturers* of others and *sometimes both*, and when we recognize this we are, as Jesus says to the scribe, ‘not far from the kingdom.’”

To know this deeply is to do the work of Holy Week. Romantic readings of Jesus’ passion keep us at a safe, neutral distance. The liturgy of the palms and the liturgy of the passion put us in the thick of things where we play many parts. And they are clarifying roles: we see our duplicity *and* our honest striving; we know ourselves culpable *and* forgiven.

The journey is the thing. Easter breaks forth. But not yet.

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