



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*

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## ***The Case for Christ, Part 7: “Seen on the Scene”*** **Matthew 21:1-17; John 20:1-10** **Palm Sunday Procession + Skits**

Today, we start our final week of reading in Lee Strobel’s book, *The Case for Christ*. There are two major divisions in this week’s reading. Chapters 13 and 14 bring more evidence on Jesus appearing to his followers, as well as strong circumstantial evidence for believing this stuff. Since the resurrection is THE miracle, and most everything else we Christians believe about Jesus hangs on that, examining evidence about the resurrection is really important. So, happy reading!

Of course, our reasons for working through Strobel’s book together include strengthening our own faith and confidence about Jesus, but also to equip us with confidence and content, to talk with another person who is not following Jesus, to introduce them to Jesus, and to invite them to follow Jesus with us. For starters, you can invite them to our Resurrection Day events (most people call it, “Easter”) next Sunday—either the 7 a.m. SonRise outdoor service and the breakfast that follows, or the 10 a.m. celebration service, right here. In your worship bulletin today, we’ve given you a *written invitation* to help you invite.

*How many of you have asked someone already?* (Well, there’s only one week left. If you don’t invite, please let me know ‘why’. Maybe there’s something about our church I need to hear, or some other way I can help you move ahead in this part of faithfulness to God.)

After his concluding chapters of evidence to build *The Case for Christ*, Strobel changes the content for his Conclusion chapter. Strobel’s last chapter is the account of his personal move toward committing his life to Christ. He’s dropped little glimpses of his personal reactions into the chapters that have come before. But his conclusion (in his book) is a summary of all the book’s content, and then his personal “verdict” based on the evidence he so energetically collected.

Bev Anderson’s study guide has been asking you more personal questions along the way, but this week especially, I invite you to compare his experience with yours. What is your reaction to Strobel’s journey? Are you more confident in your faith? Do you perhaps feel your earlier commitment to Christ was shallow, and you want to deepen your own commitment to following Jesus? If so, when I get back from vacation, talk to me! I LOVE to work with people on that!

In our weekly kick-off sermons, I have avoided detailing the content you are about to read and discuss from Strobel’s book. Instead, I’ve tried to start with the main point of one of Strobel’s chapters for the week, and take another tack with it. And I want to do that again today, to prepare you to invite someone who you know needs the Lord—and *that’s anyone who is not following Jesus now*.

Today is Palm Sunday, remembering when Jesus rode into Jerusalem in a parade of triumph. Throughout this Holy Week, we have other special services to mark events that form the climax of Jesus' life and ministry. Thursday we gather here at 7 p.m. to share The Last Supper with Jesus. Our Maundy Thursday service I think will be especially moving this year. On Good Friday evening, also at 7 p.m., we gather at Auburn Adventist Church, close by on Rock Creek Rd., for worship with other Christians to mark Jesus' crucifixion. And then we have our services here on Resurrection Day.

If you know the Palm Sunday story, you know that this was the start of a fast, downhill slide to conviction by a kangaroo court of religious authorities, their pressure upon the Roman governor during the Passover Feast, and Pilate's consent to raise Jesus up on a cross, as if he was a terrorist trying to overthrow the Roman occupation. The Palm Sunday parade starts all of that. I want to compare a 'before' text, with an 'after' text—one from the resurrection appearances—to see what God might be saying to us through the events of Holy Week.

First, open your Bibles to Matthew's gospel, chapter 21, so we can read the account of the Palm Sunday Parade, starting with verse one. Listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text Matt. 21:1-17]*

With this pre-cross account in mind, please turn now to John's gospel, chapter 20. This is one of the post-resurrection appearances, where the Risen Jesus shows up to a group of his followers. Listen again for the Word of God. *[text John 20: 1-10]*

In our first reading, Jesus enters Jerusalem after his "advance men" secure a donkey and a colt. His followers throw their cloaks on the donkey, and other people put down their cloaks on the road for the donkey and colt to walk upon with Jesus, and they cut down palm branches and put them on the ground, too. [That's why it's called, "Palm Sunday", of course.] Now, to an untrained eye, this looks like a straightforward celebration of victory. But there is so much more going on here. What kind of victory celebration could this be?

There are two very different messages in this celebration—the crowd's, and Jesus' own. Let's start with the crowd. They make a lot of noise, attracting much attention—that's their aim, and they succeed. They hail Jesus as Messiah—"Son of David" is the clue to that, for the Messiah was to be a descendant of King David, the greatest king of Israel's "Golden Age". The crowd cuts down palm branches—the palm leaf was a sign of national identity--it's on the flag of the Palestine Liberation Organization to this day. "Hosanna"—that's Hebrew for "Save Us!"—and the kind of salvation they have in mind is very concrete—kicking out the Romans from God's Promised Land. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" is a quote from a Hallel Psalm, greeting the messiah. You may remember that at various times during his ministry, the crowd around him wanted to make him king. The message of this crowd is that this "Jesus of Nazareth" is their liberator-Messiah, the catalyst of revolution against Rome and the corrupt Jewish royal and religious establishment. A new order powered by God Himself is breaking in!

Jesus has a message, too. What does Jesus say? Well, nothing--no acceptance speech, no tirade against the Romans and their toadies designed to whip up the crowd into a frenzy, which commonly happened at Passover—so common that the Roman Governor brought extra troops into the City at every Passover season.

What does Jesus do to support this hope from the crowd? Again, nothing. In fact, Jesus does some things to counter their expectation. If he had wanted to fulfill their fantasy, Jesus would have ridden in on a war horse, a great stallion. By choosing a donkey, a humble beast of burden, Jesus is preaching a visual parable of humility and service. Jesus is like the humble donkey, carrying the burden--of the sin of the people, the very people who are cheering him on right here. And there's more—Jesus is acting out a prophecy from old Zechariah's writing, chapter 9 (if you want to look it up). Jesus' message is this: his royal rule is gentle, not violent.

The crowd announces a militant warrior to rally them to achieve their own goals of freedom from Rome. Jesus announces a king who bears the burden of sin. The crowd wants to use Jesus for their own ends. Jesus will not be used by them for their own ends. He will let himself be used by them, but for God's purposes. The crowd, and Jesus, are, you might say, “at cross purposes”.

So which message wins out? Which is the right message from the Palm Sunday Parade?

The text from John tells the tale. With his resurrection, there is no conflict over who Jesus is, or who is in charge, or what his followers are to do. There were different degrees of faith and doubt among them, but they were starting to get on the same page, onto Jesus' page, Jesus' message--for Jesus is LORD!

How does this apply to us?

Playwright Frank Wedekind once wrote, “God made man in his own image, and man returned the favour.” He was right. We want to make God in our own image, to keep parts we like, ignore parts we don't, stretch His Word to our liking—whatever it takes--all because we want to stay in control. We see it in clear focus here in Palm Sunday's Parade—our sin-sickness, just like the crowd's. Most of the time, ours is not as blatant, but it's there. We may call Jesus “Lord,” but we want to be in charge of our lives.

So, which Jesus are you acknowledging on this Palm Sunday—the one you can mold to your own preferences, or the one who is Lord? The one you can ignore, or the one you obey (not out of fear, but out of love and gratitude)? Which Jesus? Which Jesus do you see on the scene in Jerusalem, in Auburn, in your life?

Is Jesus truly your Lord, or are you just playing at this Christian stuff?

If Jesus is your Lord, then you invite others to know him. It would be best for you to take APC 201, and get disciplined in APC 401, to do this yourself. We're here to help make disciples who make disciples—that's “Mission One” of this church. But in the meantime, you can take a simple step—just walk across the room (as Bill Hybels says), just call up a neighbor, just carry this invitation this week until you feel God's nudge to a particular person—and invite. The person may be a food server you sort-of “click” with, or your letter carrier you've struck up a conversation with, or the neighbor with whom you've been cooperating on rebuilding the fences that blew down in January. It may be a relative who will be visiting at Easter, or a friend from your train club or book club. I don't know when God is going to give you that nudge. Carry the invitation, so you'll be ready to invite them to the 7 a.m. SonRise event, with breakfast following, or the 10 a.m. celebration here with choir and all. Is Jesus your Lord whom you love,

and want others to know and love, too—or not? Are you afraid to be seen on the scene with him?

You decide.

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on March 16, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]