



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
 March 29, 2026
 Palm Sunday
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: “Trading Certainty with Faithfulness”

Some of you know I’m a runner.

And by ‘runner’ I mean I used to be a runner, and now I’m just trying to get back in shape. Most Saturdays you can see me struggling up the hills of Westland near our home.

Okay, some Saturdays;

Okay every once in a while, on a Saturday.

I used to be **good** runner. Not Michael Yates good, but good.

But then we moved to the mountains.

And those hills killed my running career.

Do you know what it’s like to run in Asheville, NC?

It’s all uphill. There’s no downhill.

It just keeps going up.

My first summer in Asheville, I ran the half marathon.

Almost died. Lost a toenail.

I took 6 years off after that.

Now, living here in the TN foothills, I’m trying to get back to it.

But let me say this, our hills look easy from a car.

Not so much on foot. On Westland, my watch tells me I climb about 250 ft of elevation. It’s a haul. I’m dying by the end.

I tell you this, because 250 ft is also the elevation of the Mount of Olives, the hill the disciples climb to get Jesus his donkey.

It's a climb.

They go up the hill to get the donkey,
 down the hill to get Jesus,
 back up the hill for the Palm parade,
 down the hill to the Temple,
 back up it to where they're staying.

The hills we climb.

I want you, to think of the hills, the hills we climb.

As we turn to the Gospel of Mark. The 11th Chapter. Hear the Word of God:

11 When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this: 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.' "

⁴ They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?"

⁶ They told them what Jesus had said, and they allowed them to take it. ⁷ Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!
 Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

¹¹ Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Now Jesus, just to make sure I've got this right, just one colt is all you need?

And just any colt will do?

No? No, it's a certain colt. Never ridden? Okay, good.

Jesus, do you know this colt? Surely you know its owner.

Also, no? Oh, the owner doesn't know we're coming.

You know, Jesus, I hate to ask you this: Are you asking us to steal this colt?

Oh, just say, 'The Lord needs it.' You think they will buy that?

Peter, you got any idea what's going on here? Me neither.

We often talk on Palm Sunday, about what the crowds get wrong, when they shout *Hosannah* as Jesus enters Jerusalem, right?

- They think he's a conquering hero, but instead he's about to be crucified.
- They think he's riding in triumph, but he comes instead, humble, on a donkey.
- They say, *Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*
 - And they imagine an empire to rival Rome, but Jesus preaches a kingdom of service and faith.

I came not to be served but to serve, he famously says, in the Gospel of Mark.

But here's the thing. It's not just the Palm Sunday crowds.

No one seems to have a clue about what's going on, in the Gospel of Mark.

- Not the crowds.
- Not the disciples.
- Not the religious leaders.
- Not John the Baptist. Not Pilate.

- Joseph, Mary, and Gabriel don't even show up.
 - Nobody knows what's going on.

I mean: one thing is clear:
Jesus is clearly a force for good.

He exorcizes demons; he heals people.
He forgives sin and praises faith.

But throughout, no one else seems to have any understanding of what's going on.
And unlike the Gospel of John, in Mark, Jesus never says who he is, never explains where he came from, or what his relationship with God is.

Why? Because faith, in this Gospel, is not about having the right ideas about Jesus.

Faith is not a cognition.
It's not affirming a creed.
It's not regurgitating the church's orthodoxy.

Faith is trusting and following and being amazed by Jesus.
That's it.

In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus tells his new disciples, *Follow me...and immediately they left their nets*. He never stops to explain who he is or what they should believe about him.

And then, throughout the Gospel, the disciples don't have a clue:

- *What is this, a new teaching?* They ask in chapter 1.
- *We have never seen anything like this!* They exclaim in chapter 2.
- *Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?* They ask in chapter 4.
- *Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom that has been given him?*
 - They question in chapter 6.
- In chapter 8, he walks on water, and the text says: *they were utterly astounded*.
- Chapter 9 – even by chapter 9 – when Jesus talks about his crucifixion and resurrection, and they were left (quote:) *Questioning what this raising of the dead could mean*.

Throughout the whole Gospel, the disciples are stumped.
 And these are the disciples.
 They're with him every day.
 Every day! But they're left wondering.

The funny thing is, in Mark, the only ones who actually know exactly who Jesus is; the only ones to have the correct, 'orthodox' understanding of Christ, are the demons:

I know you are the holy one of God, a demon says to him in the first chapter, *But Jesus rebuked him, saying 'Be silent.'*

What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the most high God? Another demon called Legion asks in the 5th chapter, and Jesus banishes it to a group of pigs.

It isn't having the right understanding of Jesus, that makes for faith, in the Gospel of Mark.

It's not about what think.

It's how you live.

It's what you rely upon and trust.

Which is interesting, right?

Because, frankly, throughout the vast majority of church history, faithfulness has been defined, **by having the right thoughts** in your head, about who Jesus is.

What is Jesus's relation to the creator?

Do you believe in the miracles of the Bible?

What do the crucifixion and resurrection mean?

In the middle ages, if you were a church leader, you had better get these questions right. Sometimes your life depended on it.

Nowadays, we don't burn people at the stake, but still, I think most of us have in our heads, that faithfulness is about believing the right things, right? We define our status as Christians, by what we think.

I'll give an example:

I was thinking this week, about the faithfulness required of the disciples, to go up and down that hill of the Mount of Olives.

Up and down. Up and down.

And, I had heard about a nurse named Agnes Nambozo, who scales a 1000-foot ladder to reach remote villages in Uganda to provide vaccines and basic medical care, to people who live in some of the most remote parts of the country.¹

She's the only medical person some Ugandans will ever see.

Those who are elderly.

Those who are pregnant.

Those who are too sick, to make the journey to the cities.

It's an amazing image, to see her scaling the ladder. It's as high as the eye can see. She has this white medical pack on her back. And she just goes right up.

And I was thinking: the hills we climb.

What a better illustration is there, of faithfulness?

But, I almost didn't use this illustration.

Because in all the stories I could find about Nurse Agnes Nambozo, I couldn't find anything about her faith or religious affiliation. I have no idea.

But then I thought about the disciples in Mark.

And about what faith really is.

And I asked: You know, what does it matter, what beliefs this saver holds in her head, as she climbs 1000 feet, to reach a sick child, to care for pregnant mother?

If Jesus really is the divine force of healing, wholeness, and goodness, that Mark says he is, Then isn't Jesus climbing that ladder with her, no matter what faith she ascribes to?

Isn't that what Jesus does?

He brings healing.

And he is the power that enables us, to do the same.

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus never asks us what we think.

¹ John Yang, "Meet the nurse in Uganda who climbs a 1,000-foot ladder to save lives." *PBS News Weekend*. Oct. 25, 2025. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/meet-the-nurse-in-uganda-who-climbs-a-1000-foot-ladder-to-save-lives>

He asks us who we follow. And where we put our trust.

Hosanna the crowds cried.

‘Save us’ is what that means in English.

Do you think Jesus stopped, and asked them to recite a creed first?

I was pretty hard on the Baptists last week.

So give me a few minutes to say something good about Baptists today.

I’ve talked in this pulpit about this before: when I was in college, I took an introductory class on the New Testament with a Professor, who was not kind to the New Testament. He had lost his faith in the Bible, when he was in graduate school, and he, well, he wanted to repeat the process in his own classes.

It was a great class. Challenging.

He took us through all the contradictions and historical inaccuracies of the New Testament.

Just took it apart, piece by piece.

We don’t shy away from those realities here at Westminster, but it was all new to me, back then.

I remember that semester was the first time I read the entire New Testament, front to back. It was assigned reading.

And as I read, I just kept thinking:

Well that didn’t happen.

Well that’s probably not true.

The whole thing just fell apart in my hands.

I almost gave it all up.

You know who stopped me from giving it all up?

It was a bunch of Baptists.

Not because of what they taught or preached. Not because they could make an argument that they were right and my professor was wrong. No. It wasn’t anything about how they talked. It was how they lived.

I worked as a college youth minister for a middle of nowhere Baptist church.

And in a tough time in my faith:

They showed me grace.

They showed me patience.

They showed me kindness.

When I really needed it.

When I really needed to *see* Christ, more than understand him.

Picture those disciples.

Think of those crowds.

They didn't understand what was coming.

I mean, how do you make sense of a crucifixion?

How do you get your head around a resurrection?

You have to wonder, why the church, made understanding those things the be-all / end-all of faithfulness, anyway? Why it had to say: *Our way*, is the only way.

When the church's founder, it's savior, entered Jerusalem, humble, on a donkey, not as a conqueror, on a war horse.

How did we ever get from that, to excommunication?

Not even excommunication:

How did we get from there, to shaming people about their doubts.

Or clobbering people over the head, with the idea, that there's only one right way, to believe?

Faith in the Gospel of Mark, is a matter of:

Trust, not certainty

It's partnership not power

Faith is love instead of shame

Nonviolence, in place of coercion

Fidelity rather than dogmatism

The Gospel puts wonder and mystery, always in front of theology.

And in times like today, when it's just so hard to know.

When it's impossible to be certain.

When good people of faith are scratching their head, asking,

Now, how on Earth are we supposed to be the body of Christ, in 2026?

And, on the other side of things, in a day and age when there is too much certainty:

That this side or that side is wrong.
That these people belong and those over there don't.
That this country is right and the others don't deserve any grace or mercy.

I wonder:

Can we return to the mystery of Christ in the Gospel of Mark?
Can we follow the one who rode into Jerusalem, and said, 'I came not to be served
but to serve?'

It's Holy Week. 2026.

There's a hill stretching ahead of us that we've got to climb.

Before we start up it, maybe we can lay some things down.

Like our need to always be right.

And our thirst for certainty.

Let's lay some things down.

And replace them with faithfulness.

Maybe it will make road lighter.

Maybe it will make it possible.

To walk the road together.

Amen.