

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
April 12 & 13, 2014
John Crosby
Every Day: The Living Gospel
Mark 8:31-38**

Some of you have come here today for the first time. What will the kids learn about what we believe if they come here today for the first time? They would see, frankly, the reinterpretation of a historical event, Christ coming into the city turned into a religious event, the palm parade turned into a cultural event, the preparation for Easter. Think of the images that all of us will see this week. There is the palm parade in some form or another marking the triumphal entry, and that often turns into the Easter parade in all different sizes. Sometimes that's the traditional version of the Easter parade. Holy week will be about crosses and it will be about tombs, but those images will be right next to Easter egg baskets and Easter egg hunts and White House Easter egg rolls.

This week and two weeks from now, between 1,500 and 2,200 adults will come into our weekend services, but next weekend between 4,000 to 5,000 will come. For some of them, it will be a religious Easter egg hunt, an Easter parade. They need to hear why this week and next week make a difference. May I just show you, instead of talking to you, why this week is so important in the lives of people just like you.

[Video shown. *To view, see link below.*]

It wasn't until I was around the age of 40 that I really came to know Jesus. I grew up in a family whose faith was not at all clear to me and still is not. We never really found a church home or joined a church, and we attended mostly on Christmas and Easter. I also grew up in a pretty dysfunctional family. There was lots of alcohol and drugs and lots of fighting and broken marriages. So with that foundation I was off to college and life as an adult. Needless to say, I made some bad choices. I pursued those things that were held out by the world as things that I should pursue. There weren't any strong voices or role models in my life to lead me toward a life in Christ. In my early 20s, around the time that my wife Jane and I were married, both of my parents died, first my mom and then a few years later, my dad. Looking back I can see that I had a lot of hurt and anger around that. It didn't seem fair, and I didn't have a strong faith to get me through.

I channeled a lot of those feelings into trying to prove myself, to make something of my life. For me, it was a corporate career, working very long hours in an international law firm. I kept my head down. I worked hard and I tried to be a good person. But I was trying to do all of it on my own. A huge part of that was pride, but God had a plan. First, I needed a heart softener. I had put up walls to protect myself.

Worshipping at CPC, becoming a member here and being part of a loving community helped to break down those walls. I saw Jesus followers in action, living it out, loving and serving others. That made me want to learn more. I had never read the Bible, so I signed up for classes. The Gospel became alive and real and personal for me and finally found its way into my heart. I met the real Jesus, the Jesus that died on the cross because of His choice, His obedience, His decision to follow God's will at great personal cost for me and my soul. I learned of a God that loved me and wanted to adopt me as His own child despite all of my shortcomings, the God who wants to call me His son and make me His heir despite all of my failures, the God who said, "You are mine forever and I will seal the deal with My Holy Spirit." And I said yes, the big yes. I wanted that, too, and I asked Jesus into my heart. And when I did, as you know, it changes everything. I could feel right away that the emptiness of my life, a large, God-shaped hole, had been filled. I realized that I had been trying to fill that hole for a long time with other stuff and other people, and I was overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude. I had known what it felt like to be a lost sheep, and now I knew how it felt to be found.

[Video ends.]

That's why we're here, that's why we come together, because we're all on that same journey. Palm Sunday is a reminder that there is nowhere that Jesus Christ will not go to find lost sheep. There is no price that God will not pay to dispel our pride and our fear and our emptiness and our cynicism and our doubts to give us the life that Gary has come to experience. That is why we have been talking all of these past two months about what the Gospel, the good news, is supposed to bring us. But Palm Sunday also reminds us that Gary coming to know about the heart of Jesus is not the end of the journey, but the beginning of the story. What does he do the next day? How does he live?

For the last three weeks we have been saying that the Gospel is not something that you believe, it is something you respond to. The father with the sick boy, "I believe, God. Help my unbelief." Last week we heard about the rich, young ruler, who went away sad because he loves his money more than he loves his Jesus. What happens after you come to Jesus? The passage we are going to talk about today is a passage that our staff never fights over having to preach on. I could have this every year if I wanted to and nobody would fight me for it. This is not "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want." This story is not popular, but it is vital. It appeared three times in Mark's Gospel because Jesus says it's essential. Listen to it.

31 He [Jesus] then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. **32** He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. **33** But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." **34** Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **35** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. **36** What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? **37** Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? **38** If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

The staff would say, “No, no, you can preach that one.” Jesus says three times to His disciples, “If anyone would be My follower, they must pick up their cross.” Then on Palm Sunday, Jesus shows that He goes first. It is not popular. It wasn’t popular back then because not all the people who believe want to follow and not all followers remain followers. Peter showed us just that. Peter resists the call that this is not about glory and popularity and power and salvation. This is about a cross because he sees Jesus’ trajectory through human eyes. You are gripped by the concerns of human beings and not the concerns of God.

For you and me 2,000 years later, the story is familiar enough that it sounds normal to say that the sign of Christianity is the cross. It was all about the cross, but for Peter hearing it as if for the first time, it would be like Jesus saying, “Do you know where this ends up?” and He points to the electric chair. Let’s make the sign of our movement be the electric chair and everybody who wants to be My follower has to take their place in the chair. I think we may not come out and say it, but you and I also usually equate Jesus’ love for us with comfort and agreement and good things. We may wear silver crosses. We may even have Jesus tattoos, but today picking up the cross is a reminder of the whole story. When Jesus says you have to pick up your cross, it is not a curse. It is a sign that not all roads go to the same place. This is where Jesus says, “The road to salvation is a narrow way, a narrow path, and that path has to go *through* the cross with you *carrying* the cross. You and I confuse that with, it’s not going to be fun, or there’s not going to be success, or there’s not going to be lots of stuff.

When I told my wife about this being the text she said, “Ohhhhh.” She goes, “You know, when I hear ‘Take up your cross,’ it sounds so impossible. It sounds so big. It smells like death. ‘Pick up the cross’ smells like cod liver oil.” She said, “I need to know what that looks like.” So did Peter! Peter needed to understand because he just didn’t understand. You and I need to be reminded why Jesus rebukes Peter, “Pick up the cross.” Three times He rebukes him because he doesn’t want to pick up the cross. The first time He says, “You’re not picking up the cross because anyone picking up the cross, anyone, must deny themselves”, and Peter, frankly, wants both. He wants a good God and he wants good times. He’s just like me, and Jesus reminds him that he cannot pick up the cross with his hands folded. What do you have in your hands that makes it harder for you to put your hand on the cross? Is it the awards on the wall or the awards you want on the wall? Is it money or the perfect home or the perfect kids? It’s different for every one of us. Jesus says, “You must deny yourself.” Now we think about that like it’s Lent. What do I have to give up in Lent to show God that I’m serious? But self-denial isn’t so much about giving up sweets in Lent as it is about giving up ourselves as God, ourselves as boss, ourselves as Lord. Denying ourselves is a daily decision to make another lord our ruler of life, and it’s a battle. It’s a battle for all of us.

My daughter found out why. She was listening to one of my friends preach in Washington, D.C. and she said, “He told this great story, Dad.” I know Mark’s son, Jason. Mark told the story about when Jason was a little boy, he was like four years old, and it’s Easter week. Mark was trying to be the good dad-pastor, and so he’s reading the Easter story about the palm parade and the cross and the empty grave. And little four-year-old Jason looks up at his daddy and says, “Oh, Daddy, I love this story. I can feel Jesus. Jesus is in my heart.” And he looks down at the cartoon book again and goes, “But, Daddy, where is the donkey? I see Jesus in my heart. Where is the donkey?” And Mark with that wisdom that parents rarely get pats Jason on the chest and goes, “Honey, the donkey is in your heart right next to Jesus.” That is the way we live.

We have a donkey in our hearts as well as Jesus in our hearts. The problem is that the donkey wants to go the way that makes sense and not the way of the cross. I need to keep bringing my donkey to Jesus. Most of the time, not in what I believe, the donkey shows up in the demands of picking up the cross in the every day. When you and I recognize that we have both Jesus and the donkey in our hearts, we get better at seeing when the battle comes.

The apostle Paul said it this way. “Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit in without even thinking. Fix your attention on God and be changed from the inside. Unlike the culture around you which is always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings out the best in you, developing maturity.” That’s the first rebuke. If there is too much in your hands to pick up the cross, are you ready to deny yourself?

The second rebuke he gives is, “You know, everybody who wants to save their life is going to lose it. Everybody who wants to gain the world is going to lose their soul. Who could blame Peter for going, ‘Really? I’ve been walking around getting the dust from Your sandals all over me and I’m going to lose everything?’” Peter doesn’t want to lose in life, and neither do I and neither do you. In our culture, winning is valued. Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing. Winners never quit; quitters never win. The one I particularly hated was this idea that we are looking for a win-win solution. Half of my joy in winning comes from them losing. I don’t want win-win! And Peter has grown up staking his life on the idea that God will help him win.

I cannot tell you where your struggles to save your life and to gain your world will leave you, but I can point to a couple of areas that are common in our lives that keep us away from the cross, that keep you away from living on the path of Jesus. They are ways of keeping score. How can I tell if I’m winning or losing? I keep score and one of those places for me is in the *opinion of other people*. So many of you live your lives around the opinion of other people, so intensified by social media and instant feedback in response to your every thought or whim or what someone is wearing or what someone is making or who your friends are or how you look. Is the opinion of other people more important to you than the opinion of Christ? It often is.

For many of you, the way you keep score is *time*. The power of time in our world strangles the cross. Some of you can’t pick up the cross because you are working so much. Some of you have mastered wasting time, and I am not talking to teenagers. You have mastered wasting time because you fill your minds and your hearts and your calendars with empty calories. Some of you are so busy that you are too tired to pick up the cross. And others of you think that there will be another time.

I feel that our culture struggles to save our lives for *the false god of money*. For some of you, that’s security. You don’t want the big house on the hill; you just want enough so that you can have money left when you die. Some of you are literally losing your lives saving money. For others of you, the way you live, there is no margin in your life to be generous. We just talked about being wildly generous so the children could drink living water, and you would love to do that, but you looked at your bills and you cannot do that. The god of money has choked you. I did this one last night. How many of you would admit that in your life, at some level there is a significant financial strain that causes distress? I’ll put both of my hands up. Will you poke the person next to you and tell them they were lying?

I could talk about the distractions from taking up the cross that come from a sexualized society

or the power of coarse language or the lack of discipline, but for me that idea that we are kept away from the cross by the opinion of others came home this last week. I've had a terrible month. The greatest privilege of my life besides being here with you has been being on the board of World Vision. World Vision serves 100 million children around the world. This last month the board of World Vision, of which I am a part, made some stupid mistakes. We tried to make it easier for our organization to reach out, and we tried to make it easier for married, gay Christians to work with us, and we ended up alienating everybody. We made the right real angry. They don't think we're Christian any more. We made the left *really* angry when we changed course midway and they don't buy that either. And, worst of all, there was the danger of hundreds of thousands of children losing support, hundreds of thousands of poor kids.

So being on the board, I had to explain this to major donors and significant Christian leaders. That was my task. "You talk to these four or five big Christian leaders and try to explain to them why we made this decision and why we changed course." I talked to one of them who has been a friend of mine and is the leader of one of the largest churches in the country. At the very beginning of the call, he said, "How you doing? How's Rich doing?" Rich is the president of World Vision. He said, "How're you guys doing?" Before I could give an answer, he goes, "And what the blankety-blank were you thinking?" It was like, well, thank you, this will be a fun call. We talked for a long, long time, two or three different times, and at the end, he understood how we got there, but I found myself struggling to explain to this guy whom I respect so much and whom I've looked up to for so many years in ways that he would underneath the surface think, "It's not John's fault. It's those other guys' fault. It's not John's fault."

I was so in danger of throwing other people under the bus or backing off of our good intent. I realized when I hung up the phone that I wanted so much to have his approval that I was in danger of changing my story so that I would get his approval. What it reminded me of was what I have told you year after year after year—that in the end, you have an audience of one. There is only one opinion that matters, and it is not yours, and it is not Bill Hybels', and it's not anybody else's, but I was tempted to put down the cross at somebody else's feet because I hate to lose.

What are you willing to lose? What are you willing to give up in order to pick up your cross and receive abundant life and eternal life with Jesus? We have a staff saying that we want to try to get to the last 10 percent. Most organizations talk about 90 percent of the stuff. The last 10 percent is the stuff that you are afraid to bring up because you don't want the other person to leave mad. Mostly you don't want the other person to leave, but you don't want them to leave mad. May I just say, I think the last 10 percent of this passage is the part that may be offensive to some of you. That's the third rebuke. After saying, "You have to deny yourself to pick up the cross, you have to lose your life to pick up the cross," Jesus ends by saying, "If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them." It made me wonder, this Palm Sunday, this Holy Week, how many of us are sort of secretly ashamed of the cross of Christ? I am not talking about wearing it on your chest or tattooing it on your arms. I am talking about the ability to acknowledge that you follow Christ more than anything else in your life.

In this church we have a huge desire not to bang people over the head with the Bible. We are not Bible-bangers. We want to love everybody regardless of where they are, but sometimes we are so far from being Bible-bangers that we are in danger of losing the God of the empty tomb. Some of you are so guarded about your faith, your faith is so private, nobody knows you've got

it. Others have no idea of a faith that is giving you new life in Christ, a life that they desperately need. Jesus says to all of us, "If you are ashamed of Me, if you are uncomfortable talking about Me, I'll be uncomfortable talking about you."

One of my good friends just became the president of Fuller Seminary. He was getting on a plane, praying that he would have a couple of hours to work on a book he was feverishly trying to finish. He got the window seat and put his book manuscript down on the seat next to him. Just as the plane was locking up, a little woman scurries in and says, "Oh, I think this is my seat." He picks up the manuscript and worse than that, she turns to him and starts to chat. He thought, "It's too late to put in the headphones. What do I do now?" She finally says, "That thing on your lap, is that a book you are writing?" He says, "Yes, it is," and she goes, "Oh, what's it about? Tell me what it's about." He goes, "Well, it's a book about how loving your neighbor is really loving God." He said, "The words started to stick in my throat." She didn't get it at all. She said, "Oh, that sounds like such a nice book. Is it fiction?" He said he didn't get much work done.

Taking up your cross starts when people who are willing to deny themselves let Jesus be Lord. Take up your cross means a willingness to lose the life that everybody around you sees as important. But at the end, taking up the cross has to be a public, outward act because the reason we celebrate Holy Week is because Jesus Christ picked up His cross and other people saw it. He went first; we go next. Where are you tempted to deny your relationship with Jesus? Jesus said in the Gospels, "If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Really? "For whoever wants to save their live will lose it but whoever loses it will find it."

We started with Gary talking about how he came to faith in Christ. In one of those crazy works of God, in the 10 or 15 minutes that we could not put in, you know, you take a half-hour of dialog and you turn it into four minutes, in one of the other clips, Gary said something that David [David Hammond, Director of Creative Worship] sent me in the manuscript. Gary said this.

As a newly minted Christian in my 40s, I was eager to pick up the cross and follow Jesus, but my hands were already full! I already had a very full life, a very busy life. I had to make some changes and let go of some things so that I could use my hands to pick up the cross. And right away, God placed on my heart a new sense of priorities: to make a commitment to learn more about Him, to do less of the world's work and more work for Kingdom, and to seek to keep Christ at the center as a man, as a husband, and as a father. Through God's grace, my son and daughter, who are now grown and gone from the nest, start their faith stories by saying "I was raised in a Christian home."

They are not ashamed of their Lord Jesus. That is why we pick up the cross. We pick up the cross because Jesus picked up the cross first, losing His life to save ours, and He invites us all to follow the path that leads to life.

Lord Jesus, I hope You are listening today, not just to my words but to our hearts. I pray that this Gospel would be good news for somebody here, that they would see that they have said they are a follower of Yours but, really, they are not crazy about denying themselves or losing their lives or talking about You. I pray that You will help hundreds in this room, beginning with me, to pick up our crosses and follow You to the door of death,

to the grave, that we might experience You who came out of hell to bring us life. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service: <http://www.cpconline.org/index.php?content=videos>
(GARY TYGESSON'S STORY)

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.