Tragedy or Triumph?
John 12:12-36; 19:28-30

A triumphant start

It was the beginning of the week of Passover.
And it must have seemed to Jesus’ disciples that the week was starting out in a very triumphant fashion!
Just the day before, Jesus had been the guest of honor at a supper in the town of Bethany. It was less than two miles from Jerusalem, on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, sort of a suburb of Jerusalem. And it was where Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary lived.

While Martha served at the supper, and Lazarus (whom Jesus had raised from the dead a few weeks before) shared in fellowship with Him around the table, their sister Mary demonstrated her love for Jesus in a remarkable way. She took a jar of precious perfumed ointment made of pure nard from India—worth nearly a year’s wages—and anointed Jesus’ feet with it, wiping off the excess with her hair. It was an awesome act of adoration, worship, and devotion! Judas Iscariot (who was going to betray Jesus) objected, saying that the ointment could be sold and the proceeds given to the poor. Ordinarily, Jesus might have agreed.

But His defense of Mary must have seemed strange to the disciples. He said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.”

In the meantime, people who had heard about how Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead gathered to see them both. And now as a result, the chief priests not only wanted to do away with Jesus, but Lazarus too!
The next day (Sunday), Jesus entered Jerusalem to the shouts of people waving palm branches and crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (12:13). Hearing that the one who had raised Lazarus from the dead was coming really brought out the crowds that day.

How they greeted Jesus spoke volumes. Palm branches were a symbol of victory. Coming out to meet Him as they did meant they were welcoming Him as a ruler—in the ancient Mediterranean world, that’s how rulers were welcomed. And what they said was most telling. They cried out to Him as they would to a king, quoting from Psalm 118:25, “Hosanna!” (which means, “Deliver us now!”). As the one who “comes in the name of the Lord,” they identified Him as “the king of Israel.” In other words, as Charles Talbert puts it, the crowd’s actions were

1 Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.
“an appeal for Jesus to accept the role of a nationalistic deliverer.”

How Jesus responded also spoke volumes. If He had been willing to accept the role they were asking Him to assume, He would have found a horse to ride, because kings rode in on horses during the time of war. Instead He found a young donkey and sat on it, because a king rode on a donkey colt when he was coming on “an errand of peace.” The crowd wanted Him to make war against Rome to set them free and restore their national glory; Jesus’ action was a prophetic symbol of how He was coming as the peaceable king of all the nations.

Now among this throng of people were some Greeks, the kind that the Jews referred to as “God-fearers.” They were attracted to the teachings of Judaism, especially the idea that there is only one true God. But while they admired the teachings of Judaism, they were not yet ready to make a full conversion.

These Greeks had come up to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. They came to Philip, saying, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip told Andrew, and together they went and told Jesus.

Can you imagine what a thrill this must have been for the disciples? Not only had some Jews gladly welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem; now some God-fearing Greeks wanted to see Him as well! What a triumph!

**Not what they expected**

Jesus’ reply must have stunned them. Over and over throughout the time they had been with Him, they had heard Him say, “My hour has not yet come . . . My hour has not yet come . . .” But now, with the Greeks wanting to see Him, Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:23-24).

What was Jesus talking about? What did He mean? When He talked about being glorified, wasn’t He talking about when He would be crowned king of the Jews? That’s what His disciples would have thought!

But that wasn’t it at all! Jesus was talking about dying—in a particular way, being lifted up on the cross, and for a particular reason, to give life to many. It would be through the cross that Jesus would be glorified, as He was lifted up between heaven and earth to bear the sins of humanity, and to triumph over the powers of evil and death through the cruel instrument of the cross. What would look like His utter defeat would be the means of His ultimate victory!

**Upside down**

Now this turned everything on its head! How in the world could being lifted up on a cross be equated with being glorified? Wasn’t His glory His resurrection and His exaltation to the Father’s right hand?

Throughout John’s Gospel, this idea that the cross would be the beginning of Jesus’ glorification is pervasive. When Jesus says that He will be “lifted up,” it always has a double meaning. Not only would He be physically lifted up off the ground into the air, He would be spiritually exalted as the reality and the display of God’s awesome love and His victory over the devil for the salvation of His people. On the cross, the Son of Man who has come down from heaven has started on His way back up to heaven! And in His cross Jesus would triumph over His enemies. They thought it was His end; in reality, it was His means of redemption! What

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3 Talbert, 185.
looked like tragedy would actually turn to triumph!

Isn’t that what He was talking about when He used this picture, this metaphor of the grain of wheat? Unless that grain, that kernel, that seed is allowed to fall to the ground and die, it remains alone. But if it does die, it bears much fruit, it produces many seeds.

It would be by the giving of His own life that Jesus would produce life for others. That would be the fulfillment of His purpose, the reason He came. When He would be lifted up, judgment would come on this world, and the prince of this world (the devil) would be driven out. When He would be lifted up, He would draw all people to Himself (12:32). And that would indeed be His glory!

And just to make sure that we understand that He was talking about the cross, John adds, “He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die” (12:33).

Now Jesus wasn’t content to leave His disciples behind in this. No, He would call them to follow Him in the way of the cross to glory. He reminded them that the one who loves his or her life, who is unwilling to give up his or her life for Christ, will lose it, while the one who hates his or her life in this world (in comparison to his love for Christ) will keep it for eternal life (12:25).

Then Jesus put it to them squarely: “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (12:26).

If they gave up their lives to Him and for Him, they too would experience new life. In the upper room, He would promise them that He was going to prepare a place for them, and that He would come again and take them to be with Him forever, so that where He was, they would also be (14:1-4). He would promise them that because He lives, they would also live, sharing someday in His resurrection (14:19). And as He would pray for them the night before His death, He would tell the Father, “Father, I want those whom you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may see my glory . . .” (17:24).

_Lifted up_

And then came Friday. And the week the disciples thought had started so triumphantly now seemed to turn to utter tragedy.

Put yourself in their place, everyone except the beloved disciple and the women watching at a safe distance from the cross, if at all. Can you see Him hanging there, _lifted up_, suspended between heaven and earth? He’s been there now for nearly six hours, He’s bloody, weary, and near death. And yet He is in control.

In John 19:28-30, John uses the same word in three different forms to show us that. It means to make perfect or complete, to finish, accomplish, or fulfill.

At this point, Jesus knows that everything has already been _finished_ or _accomplished_. He has done what He came to do. He has accomplished the Father’s work, as He said he would in John 4:34. He had declared that to the Father in His high priestly prayer the night before.

To _fulfill_ the Scriptures, Jesus says, “I thirst.” In Psalm 69:21, the psalmist lamented that they poisoned his food and gave him sour wine for his thirst. And so it was with Jesus. When He says, “I thirst,” they put a sponge on a branch of hyssop wood, dip it in a bowl of sour wine that was there, and lift it to his lips. Vinegar for thirst, just as the psalmist said, fulfilling the Scriptures, showing that it was all according to God’s plan.

In John 10 where Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd, He declared that He would lay down His life for His sheep—no one would take it from Him, He would lay it down of His own accord and take it up again.
And now the time has come. After He receives the vinegar, he says, “It is finished!” And He gives up His spirit. It is not taken; He is in control. He gives it up of His own accord.

He appears to be the victim. But little do they know that he is really the Victor! “It is finished!” It looks like utter tragedy. But it is ultimate triumph!

**Tragedy to triumph**

This past week, WRAL News ran a story about Sergeant Alonzo Lunsford, a medic at Fort Bragg who was on temporary assignment at Fort Hood in 2009 when Major Nidal Hasan opened fire in the Soldier Readiness Center, shooting more than 40 people, killing 13 of them. Lunsford was hit six times, with one bullet entering above his left eye, passing between his skull and brain before exiting out his left ear. It left him blind in one eye, and with “months of grueling rehabilitation” to endure. He now coaches the Fayetteville Spartans, a semi-professional football team. He sums up his experience this way:

“Did it alter my life? Yes. But the way I look at it, by it being a life-altering traumatic experience, I turned a tragedy into a triumph.”

And so did Jesus!

All of us, at some point, experience tragedy. Death, disease, accidents, or other losses come our way.

This week, our community and many other communities throughout our state, and indeed several other states, have experienced horrible tragedy with the devastating tornadoes.

But if we trust in Jesus Christ, if we follow Him as our Lord, He will see us through it! He calls us to share in His triumph, to experience the kingdom of God, this saving relationship with God Himself through His Son Jesus Christ, a relationship that not only secures us eternity with Him, but transforms our lives in the here and now.

His call and His promise and His prayer weren’t just for the eleven disciples. They were meant for us as well!

You see, *Jesus calls us to follow Him in the way of the cross to glory with Him*—through tragedy to triumph! He calls us to share in this life that comes through dying to ourselves and being willing to give ourselves up completely to and for Him. He promises us, too, that He is preparing a place for us where we’ll be with Him for eternity, and prays for us to be with Him to see His glory and be honored by His Father—to share in His resurrection at the last day, to be in His glorious presence, *forever.*

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