

"The King the World Missed"

March 29, 2026

John 12:12–19 with Zechariah 9:9–12 and Philippians 2:5–11

On June 5, 2024, astronauts Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams launched toward the International Space Station aboard Boeing's new Starliner capsule. The mission was supposed to last eight days. They packed accordingly — eight days of clothes, eight days of supplies, complete confidence in the vessel they had trained for and trusted.

They did not come home for nine months.

Helium leaks. Thruster failures. The capsule was quietly sent back to Earth empty. And two of America's most accomplished astronauts floated 250 miles above the world, watching the seasons change, waiting for a rescue they could not arrange for themselves.

That image — stranded far above the earth, the trusted vessel failed, waiting on a rescuer they hadn't originally planned on — is the story of every human soul. Keep it in mind.

Zechariah wrote these words five centuries before Palm Sunday: "Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) And then God describes this king's kingdom: no chariots, no warhorses, no battle bows. Instead — "he shall speak peace to the nations." And the reason: "because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free... Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope." (Zechariah 9:11–12)

That is the Father's righteous will for his people — for you, his chosen son, his chosen daughter, called to reign with Christ over all creation. Receive the King as he actually is. Trust his way. Love him with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. Love your neighbor with the same self-emptying humility with which the King himself came. Live as a prisoner of hope — anchored to the blood of God's covenant, not to your own arrangements.

That is the standard. Now let us be honest about how we have measured up.

The crowd in Jerusalem had a plan. They had engineered their own rescue — a military king, a warhorse, Roman power shattered by superior force. So when Jesus arrived on a borrowed donkey, they cheered anyway, hoping he would eventually perform as expected. Within five days, when he clearly would not, they screamed for his crucifixion.

We shake our heads at them. And then do the same thing before the week is out.

We love God with our preferences, not our whole hearts. We worship on our schedule, at our convenience, negotiating his commandments into suggestions we revisit when circumstances allow. We want the resurrection without the cross, the crown without the donkey. And Paul makes the conviction sharper: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant." (Philippians 2:5–7)

The mind of Christ is kenosis — self-emptying, the voluntary pouring out of privilege for the sake of another. Look honestly at your week. Look at our culture. What you see is the opposite: grasping for status, clinging to the last word, demanding the world arrange itself around our comfort, and calling it strength. We have not had the mind of Christ. We have had the mind of the crowd.

We packed our whole lives around our own capabilities, our own moral performance, our own spiritual track record — trusting a vessel full of slow leaks. And like Butch and Suni, we have found ourselves stranded, watching the seasons change, realizing what we trusted cannot bring us home.

Here is the gospel. The rescue comes from outside.

"Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:8)

The King Zechariah announced rode into Jerusalem not to launch a campaign but to complete a rescue mission. The donkey was not a miscalculation — it was the plan. And this week, the days ahead will prove it with a force no warhorse ever could.

The crowd wanted a king who would seize power. But on Thursday night, this King seized a towel and washed dirty feet. They wanted a king who would demand tribute. But on Thursday night he broke bread and said this is my body, given for you — offering his very self as the tribute, paid in full, on your behalf. They wanted a king who would crush his enemies. But on Friday he let his enemies crush him — absorbing every blow, every nail, every mocking word — because that was the only way to absorb your sin and carry it out of existence. And on Saturday, when the tomb was sealed and the world assumed the rescue had failed, that silence was not defeat. It was the stillness of a debt being completely settled, a price fully paid, a covenant kept to its last syllable.

The crowd missed it entirely because they were looking for the wrong kind of king. But the donkey was always the throne. The cross was always the victory. The tomb was always the door.

On March 18, 2025, Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams splashed down safely — inside a Crew Dragon, a vehicle they had not launched in and had not originally planned on. Nine months of waiting. Then: home. The rescue came entirely from outside their own effort, on a timeline they did not control, in a form they had not chosen.

Easter morning is the splashdown. The stone rolled away. The folded grave clothes. The angel's declaration cutting through every locked room, every Holy Saturday silence, every moment you have ever floated stranded in the dark: He is not here. He is risen. The waterless pit releasing its prisoner. "That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2:10–11)

When absolution is spoken over you this morning, that is the blood of the eternal covenant applied directly to your conscience — declared clean. When

you come to this table, the King who rode the donkey, washed the feet, broke the bread, and walked out of the tomb gives himself to you, for the complete forgiveness of every sin, for the rescue of every soul who has finally stopped trusting the leaking capsule.

Now go home today and live like the rescued person you are. Love your neighbor. Empty yourself. Tell the truth. Serve without applause. And as you do, the Holy Spirit does his full unhindered work — slowly, surely conforming you into the likeness of the King whose mind you are learning to carry.

The Pharisees muttered: "Look — the world has gone after him." (John 12:19) They meant it as despair. God means it as your calling.

Today you waved the palms. This week the King will show you, day by day, exactly who he is and exactly what he came to do. The donkey announced his nature — the Prince of Peace, coming in shalom. The thorns declared his crown. The cross became his throne. And the empty tomb was the Father's thundering verdict over all of it: accepted, sufficient, finished, and eternally valid. You are a prisoner of hope. The rescue is real. And you are going home.

Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Pastor Ron Breight Christ Lutheran Church Forest Hills, Pennsylvania

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