

“Taking Up Palms”
March 28, 2021

Philippians 2:5-11
John 12:12-19

As we have prepared for Easter this year, I invited you to let go of all that was weighing you down so that with open hands and open hearts you might receive the gifts of God that you need now so that you might move forward. I asked you to consider what it is that you need to receive, what you need to *take up* so that our Easter celebrations will be more real, more joyful, more empowering. I suggested receiving God’s care, God’s encouragement, God’s compassion—and even *taking up* your cross, living authentically as we follow in the way of Jesus Christ, known and to be made known to us.

On this final Sunday in Lent, let us, along with countless others, take up palm branches.

Most likely, you have heard the story countless times:

The crowd gathers palm branches and goes out to meet Jesus. Some look forward to the arrival of a leader who would triumph over the Romans who occupied their land. So, they shout: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

As the Gospel of John tells the story, it is only at this point, in order to clarify what it means to call *him* a king, that Jesus finds a donkey and rides, not as a conquering warrior, but humbly. The One they greet reveals strength in weakness, greatness in humility, conquest in vulnerability.

John’s Gospel is also clear that the disciples of Jesus did not understand what was going on at the time. Only through the crucifixion, resurrection, and ultimate departure of Jesus would any of what Jesus said or did be comprehended. Only when the Spirit of God aided their memory, John says, were the followers of Jesus able to grasp the significance of that day.

We rarely—if ever—understand the full meaning of events as we experience them.

People keep writing articles spelling out the impact of the pandemic on our lives. You’ve seen them: what has “changed forever,” what will “never be the same again.”

But we don’t know now. We can’t know now.

Later, we begin to see.

Later, we begin to find meaning.

Paul, writing decades after Palm Sunday and Good Friday and Easter, still struggles to understand the meaning of those events. Looking back, however, he helps us—two millennia later—to better see who this Jesus is. He quotes an early Christian hymn—and

if you look in most Bibles, you'll see that his words are presented as poetry instead of prose. Early Christians sang:

Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself.
 being born in human likeness.
 And...humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death,
 even death on a cross.

In this hymn the earliest Christians affirmed that the reality beyond all that is—is also the humble, human Jesus.

I once saw a movie poster that showed a picture of Jesus. It read: “The real Jesus was different. He was human.”

People found that as they followed *this* human being, they were more alive, more human that they had ever been before.

Jesus spoke about being fully alive. It seemed as natural as a seed falling into the ground and producing a great harvest of wheat.

Jesus talked about the love of God. That love seemed like the protective care of a good shepherd.

Jesus even talked about losing your life to save it. When he did, it not only seemed to make sense, it almost, *almost* seemed possible.

Without any real understanding, the crowd takes palm branches and goes out to meet this human Jesus.

As Paul concludes that ancient hymn, the subject changes. God acts.

Therefore, God highly exalted him...
 so that at the name of Jesus
 every knee should bend,
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

Now, this hymn offers no moral message. It does not tell us: “humble *yourself* now and later *you* will be number one.”

This hymn offers no moral message, but it does help us understand who this Jesus is as he approaches the capital city and his time of betrayal and death. And in doing so, it shines a new light on our own lives as well.

Jesus comes into Jerusalem to the praise of the multitude. Within a week he is carried out of the city by a throng of people shouting crucify him. This seems *real*, doesn't it? We don't know when it might happen, but we are quite aware of the reversal of fortune.

With the pandemic, racial reckonings, political upheaval, economic turmoil, and disasters both natural and human made our world has turned upside down many times in the past year. And here we are, marking our *second* Palm Sunday separate from each other.

As the Spirit helps us remember the events of this day and this week, we begin to see how we might move forward.

We know the gladness of Palm Sunday—and celebrate God's power and love.

We also know the horrible defeat of Good Friday—and still celebrate God's power and love.

Ultimately, we know a love that is stronger than death. In John's Gospel, even on Palm Sunday and Good Friday our eyes are turned toward the empty tomb.

When the Gospel of John speaks of Jesus being “glorified” it refers to all of these events. Jesus is betrayed, arrested and crucified. Jesus is raised from death by the power of God—and in all these events we see his “glory.” That is, we can begin to understand just who this Jesus is and what it means to call him “King.”

This is a week in which, yes, we look at the death of Jesus.

The first thing we must do this week, then, is to enlarge our concept of death. Death is more than the last moment of life. We die all our lives. Life begins to be limited from the moment we are born and continues acquiring limitations until we come to that last, final limit.

When we look at the death of Jesus we are really looking at the *life* of Jesus—how he took up the conflicts of life, how he took up the journey of life. Jesus embraced death just as he embraced all that life brought him: joy and his sorrow, conflicts and confrontations.

Unlike the disciples who did not understand what was happening at the time, we know the whole story of this week. And we know that everything does not work out. As we take in this entire week—life, death, *and* resurrection—we are invited to take up our own lives in the faith that dares to act with no iron-clad assurance of success. As the 20th century New Testament scholar, Rudolph Bultmann put it: “We anticipate the future in faith, not foreknowledge.”

We are helped in this anticipation and in this faith by the spiritual that is our final hymn this morning—in the same way that other spirituals have encouraged us during Lent this year.

“Ride on King Jesus” has its roots in the Palm Sunday story.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, the religious leaders realize that they can do nothing to stop him. He comes humbly but also without hinderance. James Farley, who had been enslaved as a child, remembered singing “Ride on King Jesus, No man can hinder *Thee*,” to the fear and anger of white slave-owners. They understood that if this “king” could not be hindered, neither could those who sang of him in the hope of liberation.

As the African-American theologian James Cone pointed out, this King Jesus is “the deliverer of humanity from unjust suffering.”¹ In humility, we too, might sing with those enslaved and those set free: “No man can hinder *me*.”

No one.

We will not be hindered as we move forward in faith.

Yes, we will know opposition.

We will know suffering.

We will know defeat and death.

But no one—*no one*—can hinder us.

We trust God—even in our own suffering—knowing that God was faithful to Jesus even in his suffering.

We trust God—even when life goes well—knowing that the whole point of Jesus’ life and death was that we might be fully alive.

We trust God—even in our dying—because this human being Jesus was faithful even to death and has thereby opened up life eternal for all.

In this world truth and justice, love and beauty—even made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth—can be defeated and trampled down. Evil is strong indeed.

Our hope is not in positive thinking. Our hope is not in looking on the bright side and waiting for spring.

Our hope is in God’s power to begin again, in God’s power to renew destroyed lives. Our hope is in the continual springtime of God’s mercy.

Our hope is in the resurrection.

We are often defeated.

Even Jesus was defeated and died.

God however is not defeated.

We take up palms, not because we understand all of this, but because even in these very uncertain days, we choose to walk in the ways of Christ in this hope.

May the crucified and risen Christ continue to ride on unhindered before us.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-ride-on-king-jesus>