

Sermon

Sunday, April 14, 2019

Charleston, SC

8:00 am & 10:30 am Sermon ~ Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 19:28-40, 22:14 – 23:56

No Pole Vaulting

The Rev. Alfred Zadig, Jr.

Hosanna, Lord Hosanna! Hosanna means Save Now! In the spirit of Psalm 118, can't you just hear David and the Jews yelling Save Now coming into Jerusalem! In the spirit of Luke 19, and centuries later, can't you see the Jews waving their palm fronds and shouting Save Now Jesus!

Well, on February 15, 2014, in Donetsk, Ukraine, Frenchman Renaud Lavillenie may have been yelling Save me Now Jesus, as he set the pole-vaulting world record, jumping 20 Feet 2.5 Inches. To put that into perspective, that would be Pole Vaulting from the floor to the pineapple above the Pulpit. Yes, 5 feet above the rim of the balcony!

Enough to have anyone of us saying, Save Now Jesus! Pole Vaulting goes all the way back to ancient Greeks and Celts. When warfare hit, their soldiers would pole vault over such obstacles as rivers, gorges, enemy walls, and vicious animals, jumping right over them to the other side in safety.

Pole Vaulting helps us understand Palm Sunday because Pole Vaulting is something Jesus never did. Let me explain. I'm no gymnastic pole vaulter, but I'm a pretty good spiritual pole vaulter. I find it easy to plant the pole, and spiritually Pole Vault over the valleys of my life, instead of facing them. I wonder if this rings true for you?

Our valleys may not be vicious animals, or enemy walls. No, ours come in the form of situations hard to face, a tragedy, an addiction, a mistake

with terrible consequences, a sin, a relational reconciliation, a refusal to forgive, or a refusal to be forgiven. We can pole vault right over them all. And when we do, our lives become littered with valleys the next generation has to deal with. I have also found that that it's easy for me, and maybe for you, to pole vault over the words of Jesus, or doctrines in Christianity I just don't like or feel comfortable with. Pole Vaulting over letting Jesus take control over every aspect of my life. Pole Vaulting over the teaching of Jesus, for instance, that demand we turn the other cheek. Pole Vaulting over even thinking of Jesus suffering the most painful form of death on the Cross.

My friends, we may never understand Palm Sunday and Holy Week until we understand this, from C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*. Lewis writes, "Enemy-occupied territory—that's what the world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king came down in disguise, to call all of us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage against evil." Lewis continues, "When you go to church you are really listening in to the secret wireless from our friends: which is why the enemy is so anxious to prevent us from going to church!" In other words, GOD could have pole vaulted over his imperfect-sinful creation, just gone on to the next thing, but instead he sends Jesus down into our earthen Valley, our sin-laden enemy occupied territory, to redeem and save us!

Jesus did not pole vault! He came down into the valley to face and save every human being from the slavery, tyranny, control, and regret of sin. Jesus reaches down, takes our sin upon Himself and dies on a cross in our place. Jesus was sent down from heaven to earth, to assure our eventual coming up from earth to heaven! AND THIS IS THE DAY! Palm Sunday is D-Day. The day where that reaching down, that descent literally began its final earthly chapter. Luke 19:37...Jesus, riding on that donkey, reaches a place above Jerusalem. A profound pause before the road literally descends down the slopes of the Mount of Olives, the southern path that many of you who have been to Israel have walked yourself. Despite the Palm waving and the fanfare, Jesus knows he's descending into pain and the valley of the shadow of death. That literal descent through the Kidron Valley is critically symbolic of God sending his hand down to earth to save us. The Donkey Jesus rides on represents peace and love. Jesus descending on the donkey with hands outstretched is basically saying, "Even now, will you not receive me so you can be saved?" It tells us Jesus has quiet authority not just over humanity, but all of creation including un-ridden, un-broken in donkeys! No easy task!

Jesus descends even with a bounty on His head. The Pharisees want Jesus dead. Jesus knows it, and descends anyway. Why? Jesus knows He is part of God's master rescue plan. For

centuries before, it is in that very spot of descent above Jerusalem that God promises King David that one of his descendants would sit on the eternal throne forever! The very spot where David's son Solomon takes his father's throne by riding a donkey on the same descent across the Kidron Valley. The spot where David would receive the promise and Solomon would receive the crown. All of which leads to Jesus wearing that eternal crown. Jesus loves you and me so much, he comes down, descends, meets humanity where we are and says I am here to save you. Jesus doesn't avoid the valley. Jesus doesn't jump over the valley. Jesus enters the valley to bring victory. Jesus teaches us that the way up is first down.

My friends, park your pole. Today is about saying, Lord, go with me as I face the valleys, hardships and tragedies of my life. And help me go with you to walk the final days in the valley of your earthly life. Help me not pole vault either of them. For, as I walk in your suffering Lord, you will give me the strength to face my valleys, rivers, gorges, muck, and mud, so I would be freed!

Therefore My friends, I urge you, do not pole vault over the most important week of the year, Holy Week. I know it's easy to Pole Vault from Palm Sunday to Easter, don't do it. Go down, enter the valley. Go down to Maundy Thursday where we see this sanctuary stripped of all her finery, symbolizing the stripping of Jesus. Don't Pole Vault over Good Friday, where we hear the sounds of nails pounded through the hands and feet of Jesus onto that cross. Don't Pole Vault over Holy Saturday and the opportunity to walk your valleys through Spiritual Counsel with Clergy. Enter Holy Week to be freed of whatever holds you back. Don't Pole Vault Holy Week! Get into it! For only when you do, will Easter make any sense. Only when you hear the sounds of the nails into the cross will you realize the power the love Jesus has

for you, to the point that on Easter Sunday, your Easter Alleluias therefore will come from the deepest place of your soul. And will be the most meaningful words you've ever said! Alleluia because Jesus really has saved me!

My friends, Jesus descended to death. In that deepest valley and pit of Hell, God the Father raised Jesus to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name, that we would rise, forgiven and free. Park the Pole. The way up is down. If we say no, we say yes to great eternal pain. If we say yes to facing the valleys, we say no to more pain. Park the Pole.

Finally, let me give you an example of how this plays out in life. Years ago at my former parish, there was an elderly lady, who has since died. She first came to me for a private confession, something to confess that she felt was just too big to manage on her own. She came for private confession the day before Easter to face down that painful valley of her past. But she could only go so far down into the valley. The next month she came back and went further into the valley of her past. The next month, a bit more. This went on for 12 months, to the day she finally was able to go to the bottom with Jesus, and receive total and absolute healing, joy, forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and the assurance of everlasting life! She was never the same again.

My friends on this Palm Sunday, this Holy Week, park the pole. Go into the valleys with Jesus, and you will witness those valleys turn to victory so you in turn can help others face into their valleys and find victory.

Let us pray.