

The service today, on Palm Sunday, is one of the oddest in the church year. We start with a celebration. But we very quickly go from triumph and glory, to tragedy and death. If Jesus could be here with us I would ask him a whole bunch of questions. Why did you go to Jerusalem if you knew it was dangerous? Didn't you know that you would be powerless against the Roman rulers and the Jewish religious leaders?

Jesus may not be standing here this morning, but he has answered those questions in the Gospels. He asks us, *"Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?"* (Luke 2:49). When he speaks to his disciples he says, *"As the Father has sent me. So, I send you."* (John 20:20) And at that famous feeding of thousands, *"You give them something to eat."* (Mark 6:37) He's teaching them, and us, through these words that whatever our circumstances, we have the power to help others. That is the power of new life.

Jesus' goals....his passion...was about bringing us to the Father, to himself. *"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."* (John 12:32), he said. Jesus has empowered others through the strength that he had been given by God, the Father. His power paradoxically came from his own powerlessness. He knew it, and he didn't care. It didn't faze him a bit that he was powerless in the face of those who would lynch him, try him, and condemn him to death. If you try to be powerful, like a stiff and brittle branch, you will break in a strong wind. But that same wind goes over the grasses and reeds, bends them low, and they stand right back up again.

I ask you to think about these things, powerlessness in the face of an overwhelming enemy, and our empowerment by the action and example of Jesus as I tell you a story about my Uncle. Uncle Jacques was my uncle by marriage, my father's brother-in-law. Jacques was from Belgium. Born in 1913, he grew up there, went to college, and then received his PhD in botany. That was when Hitler began invading France in 1940. When this happened, my uncle decided that he had to do something to help the Resistance Movement. He and his friend

came up with a scheme to get Jews out of France before they could be captured by the Nazis. They formed a Bicycle Club, "Touring Club de Belgique". They had their club formally licensed so that they could officially cross the border into France for a bicycle ride. They acquired fake passports so that they did not appear to have names that might be associated with Jewish families, and they contacted Resistance Movement leaders in France to communicate about where they should go and who they should evacuate. Written messages were passed back and forth in a special thermos that Jacques made by taking the thermos apart and inserting the notes between the glass inner container and the outer metal container. Jacques said that sometimes they took out the thermos and drank from it as they were waiting for their papers to be inspected as they crossed the border.

They successfully brought back many Jews on bikes for whom fake papers had been made up. Jacques also carried with him a blank passport. It had his picture and an official governmental stamp, and if his cover had been blown at any time he could ditch his last passport, and make up a new name and fill in the new passport.

One mission was especially memorable. Jacques and his friends arrived on bikes at the home of a young man they were supposed to spirit out of France. But when Jacques asked the fellow to get his bike and come along he said, "I have no bike."

"OK," Jacques said, "we'll find you one somewhere."

"But, you see," said the young man, "I can't ride a bike."

"You can't ride a bike?"

"No, I was never taught. My family had no use for bicycles."

Now they were in a quandary. The resistance information he had received never mentioned that this guy couldn't ride a bike. Now what would they do? It was clear that even if they could find a bicycle this guy would not pass as a bike club member. They talked and thought all night long, coming up with possible plans and discarding them. Finally in the morning, they settled on the most probable of the ideas. It was risky, but all their plans were risky. They went to speak to the local Catholic priest, hoping against hope that he would be sympathetic

to their cause. The young Jewish man assured Jacques that he had reason to believe that the priest would help them. And he did. The problem was solved. So, this time, the touring group went across the border without their charge: He was travelling at some distance behind them. The Jewish man was dressed in black clerical garb and was riding in a horse drawn buggy alone: Just a priest doing his duty to visit the family of a parishioner.

Jacques continued his brave and daring work for quite a while. I wish I remembered what he told me about the number of people he rescued from France. But it isn't so important. His achievement had nothing to do with a tally of how many Jews he saved. It didn't matter if it was 5 or 10 or 50, he was doing what he needed to do.

Sadly, the rest of his family was arrested back in his hometown, and he never heard anything about them again. He was never able to find out what had happened to them. Jacques was devastated that he could do nothing to save his own family.

At some point soon after he himself made his escape from Europe, and came here to the US. He worked first at the Smith College Plant Experiment Station where he met and married my Aunt Lily. Later he became a professor of biochemistry at UVA and Aunt Lily a physics professor at Sweet Briar. Uncle Jacques passed away in 2003 from cancer. Aunt Lily had died some years earlier from Alzheimer's. Jacques was powerless in many ways, like a reed that the wind blows over. He was powerless in the face of the Nazi regime and powerless to save his family. But the power he had was to save the lives that he could.

Just out there in the hallway is a photo of Jacques and his friend on their bikes. Also you can see his Touring Club license, his fake passport with the name of Roulant on it. (Funny that name he chose. It means rolling in French.) And there is also that blank passport which he never needed to use, but kept all those years.

So, Jesus, why was it that you went to Jerusalem even though you knew it was dangerous? Jesus answers us again through the Evangelists, *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the*

*prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* Luke 13:34

Jesus did it for love. He came riding into Jerusalem powerless, and weaponless, on the back of a colt. He showed us what a true savior is, he is one of us. He showed us how to find our power even through our powerlessness. Through his death he showed us how to live. He did it for us.