

As they led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him.²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’³⁰ Then

*“ ‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!”
and to the hills, “Cover us!” ’*

³¹ *For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:26-31)*

From Pilate’s Palace to Golgotha

This year during Lent, we’ve been traveling with Jesus as he makes his way to the cross. Tonight, we’re considering the most famous road that Jesus traveled on that journey: the *Via Dolorosa* which means the Way of Sorrows. This is a real road that stretched from Pilate’s palace to Golgotha or Calvary, both of which mean the Place of the Skull. The Way of Sorrows is about a half-mile long. Tomorrow pilgrims from all over the world will walk that half mile to retrace the steps of the Savior. The vast majority of them will stop at fourteen “stations of the cross” which are along this road and in the church at its end. But this devotion is sadly misplaced. The Bible doesn’t mention most of what “the stations of the cross” claim to commemorate. There are dented stones where Jesus is supposed to have dropped his cross. There’s a place where St. Veronica is supposed to have wiped Jesus’ face with a cloth – and Jesus supposedly left an imprint of his face in the cloth. But the Bible does not say one word about Veronica and her towel or Jesus dropping his cross. It really is sad that the focus is so much on these doubtful events because the Bible does record two incidents that did take place. Tonight, we’re going to focus on those incidents as we follow Jesus **from Pilate’s palace to Golgotha.**

I.

A half mile doesn’t sound like very much ground to cover. But Jesus walked this distance after a very long and difficult night. He had been hauled from Annas to Caiaphas to Pilate to Herod and back to Pilate again. At every stop, soldiers had worked Jesus over. He had lost an enormous amount of blood from scourging. Now he had to walk that last half mile carrying the wooden beam that they would nail him to when he got there. It was more than any human body can bear. So the soldiers seized a man named Simon and forced him to carry the cross. So tonight, we travel with Jesus **from Pilate’s palace to Golgotha with Simon.**

Who was Simon? We know very little about him. He was from Cyrene in modern day Libya, a good 800 miles from Jerusalem. Simon was probably coming into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover which had begun the night before but would continue for a full week. Simon, no doubt, was looking forward to continuing that celebration when he got swept up in the crowd that followed Jesus out to be crucified. That changed his whole day. Certainly, he had not come to Jerusalem for this.

Many people pick up the thread and say that Simon was a living example of doing what Jesus calls us to do: to take up our cross and follow him. But Luke says, “**...they seized Simon from Cyrene ... and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus ...**” This was no act of love from a follower of Jesus. Simon had no choice. The Romans made him forget about whatever other plans he had and carry that cross. And it was no act of mercy from the Romans either. It would be hours before they even had Jesus up on the cross because it took a minor feat of engineering to attach those men to the cross pieces and then get the whole structure up in the air. If Jesus kept falling down under the weight of the cross piece, it could’ve taken all day just to get started.

But a bigger question for us is: why did Simon need to carry Jesus’ cross? Jesus is God. He should’ve been able to carry that cross around the world without any difficulty. But by that reasoning, none of what Jesus suffered that day would’ve hurt him. He was God. You can’t hurt God. But Jesus was also a real human being. His human body took a tremendous beating. Being God made that beating count for everyone. But Jesus suffered that beating without using his power as God to make it any easier. Jesus’ weakness at this moment shows us just how real his sacrifice is. He chose to be weak for us, who could never stand up under the punishment of hell.

Somewhere in all that Jesus suffered, God did a miracle for Simon. You see, when Mark tells this story, he calls Simon “the father of Alexander and Rufus.” Mark mentions Simon’s sons as if his readers would know who they were. We don’t know who they were, but Paul does greet a Rufus in Rome and Mark wrote his gospel first for the congregation in Rome. So it would seem that Simon’s sons were well known in that congregation. Maybe they were even leaders there. Is it too much to assume that they learned the faith from their father? Simon got a front row seat to the events of Good Friday. He heard the words Jesus preached to the women a few minutes later. He probably stayed and heard Jesus speak seven times from the cross. By the time it was over, he may very well have echoed the words of the centurion that we will hear tomorrow: **“Surely this man was the Son of God!”** We can’t know for sure, but it seems like Simon became a believer because of all that he saw and heard that day. Then his children heard the gospel and the part their father played in bringing Jesus to the final destination of his life here. Through that gospel, God made them believers. If that’s true, we can guess that after this Simon did take up his cross and follow Jesus. He did serve his Lord not because Roman soldiers made him but because the love of Christ compelled him.

My friends, why do we take up our crosses and follow Jesus? Why do we support the ministry here at Peace? Why do we volunteer our time and our gifts and our hard-earned dollars? Could it ever be true that we do it because we’re forced to? Yes, my friends, I’m afraid it can be. We can be manipulated by pastors and stewardship committees. We can be guilted into giving more and doing more. We can feel like we have to do this or God is going to be angry. We have to do this or our school is going to close. Is there really any difference between that kind of “have to” and the kind that Simon experienced when Roman soldiers fingered their swords and told him to carry that cross? No, there’s not. Only when we trust in Jesus and make a sacrifice to him does God count our time and effort and money as a true gift of love. When we’re manipulated, when we obligate ourselves for no other reason than guilt, we are not taking up our cross and following Jesus.

Have you ever been guilty of that kind of sin? I have. Sunday comes for me every week whether I feel prepared or not. And I will not pretend like every hour that I’ve spent preparing to preach and teach was 100% motivated by the gospel. I’ve guilted myself plenty. Have you? I think most of us have to admit that there have been many times when our gifts and service came from fear of not being ready, from guilt, or even from a desire for a pat on the back: Thanks for typing that report. Thanks for singing in church. Thanks for doing whatever. If that thanks isn’t there and we feel upset, well, that’s a pretty good sign that our motivation is wrong. If it’s wrong, then we’re proving we’re sinners who deserve death and hell.

Because that’s true for all of us, Jesus let those Roman soldiers and Jewish temple guards beat him so bloody that he couldn’t even carry his cross. Jesus let those Roman soldiers nail him to that cross and he paid for all our sin, even the sin in our hearts. He paid for our false motivation and our pride and our fear. God has wiped all our sin away. Tonight, on Maundy Thursday, we’re celebrating Jesus’ body and blood, sacrificed for us and also given to us in communion so that we personally understand that God has indeed forgiven our sin. What a wonderful gift!

II.

In the ancient world, executions were popular. They were the original reality entertainment. So a large crowd followed Jesus out to the cross. But Luke singles out for us the large number of women who followed Jesus and wept for him. Jesus stopped and preached to these women. So tonight, we follow Jesus **from Pilate’s palace to Golgotha with a sermon.**

Why did those women come? Jesus was a celebrity. We all know what happens when celebrities go to court. How much more for Jesus who was far greater than any singer or movie star? But I think there’s more to it. Women at this time had almost no rights at all. They were often treated like possessions. But Jesus talked to them and answered their questions. He showed them the same love and concern that he showed men. So it really shouldn’t surprise us that his trip to the cross attracted a crowd of women who wept for this very special teacher.

But most of these women did not follow him out of faith. That’s why Jesus turned and said, **“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.”** Jesus didn’t need their tears. He tried to make them see that their situation was infinitely worse than his. That may have been hard to believe on that particular morning, since Jesus was less than half a mile from having nails driven through his hands and feet. But it was true because these women were in danger of God’s judgment.

Jesus warned them that the day would come when they would wish they had no children. Why would a mother ever wish that? The day was coming when they would watch their children suffer and die. The day was coming when God would visit his judgment on Jerusalem. That judgment began in A.D. 70 when the Roman army surrounded Jerusalem. They laid siege to the city for almost six months. The people inside resorted to cannibalism to keep from starving and finally, the Romans killed over 100,000 people. But all that was just the beginning of God's judgment. Because they rejected Jesus, most of these women and most of their descendants wound up in hell. Jesus warned them because he did love them and he wanted them to repent and believe in him while there was still time.

These women had no faith in him as their Savior and their tears were wasted. Now we do believe in Jesus. But there is a temptation for us in Lent to fill our churches with so much emotion and schmaltz that we miss the real meaning. Jesus still does not need our tears. He never asked us to cry for him. Often, during Holy Week, we're tempted to dwell on the blood and the pain and the gore – to replay Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and recoil in horror at all that Jesus suffered. But, my friends, recoiling in horror at Jesus' sufferings is not faith. What we need to recoil at is the cause for those sufferings. We are the cause. We were born God's enemies and our sin corrupts all that we do. It haunts us every day of our lives. The real emotion Jesus was looking for on that day – the real emotion he is looking for today – is sorrow over our sins. I am guilty. I sent Jesus to the cross. God forgive me.

And he does. That is the beauty of this story. Jesus dying for us is not gruesome. It's wonderful. It's God's love taking all our sin away. Tonight we remember what Jesus did for us. We do remember our need. But we also remember God's solution. We trust in Jesus to save us from our sin. On Maundy Thursday, we celebrate his death and life for us because this is the night when we remember his gift of the Lord's Supper. And no Christian should ever come to God's table unprepared. But how should I prepare? Pinch yourself. Are you alive? Are you human? Then you must realize that you are a sinner and you need the grace and forgiveness of God. Pinch yourself. Do you have flesh and blood? So did Jesus. He took our flesh and blood when he came into this world – the flesh that he let be beaten to a pulp. The flesh and blood he offered in your place. The flesh he put into the communion wafer you will shortly eat and the blood he put into the wine you will drink. That is true preparation: recognize you are a sinner and trust that in communion you will receive the real body and blood of Christ to take that sin away. Then commit yourself to a new and holy life. Amen.