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Palm Sunday

Carrying the Cross

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Crucifixion wasn't a Jewish means of execution. As far as we can tell, it was invented by the Persians in the fifth century B.C. as a means of controlling and intimidating the people they conquered. When the Romans adopted it, they too used it in their occupied territories as a display of power. The crucified were placed on crosses along roads, where they would typically linger for days as a warning for all to see what could happen if they resisted Rome. Thus crucifixion was a very public display of power used by the political leaders.

But as the story goes, it was not the political leaders but the Jewish religious leaders who kept pressing for Jesus' death. I have often wondered if the chief priests and scribes wanted Jesus dead that badly, why they didn't just stone him to death? That was the Jewish form of capital punishment. They stoned others frequently. They would certainly stone others for the blasphemy they claimed Jesus committed. Later they stoned Stephen for simply affirming Jesus had been raised from the dead. So why did the religious leaders go through the bother of having Pilate condemn Jesus to crucifixion? Why didn't they just quietly drag Jesus to a place and throw rocks at him until he was dead?

I think it is because Jesus would not allow them to. Every time they attempted to take him by force, he prevented them, saying, "My time has not yet come." The crucifixion isn't about what anyone did to Jesus. It is about what Jesus did publicly in front of the whole world, and for the whole world. That is why he had to be crucified. According to Mark, during his years of ministry, Jesus repeatedly prophesied that he would be rejected by the religious leaders and handed over to the Gentiles to be killed as a sacrifice for all the guilty Barabbases of the world.

Then with words that must have startled his followers, according to Mark, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple". Not having a clue what Jesus meant by carrying the cross and following him, and thinking that the whole point of having a Savior was to avoid the cross, the disciples did all they could to prevent Jesus from dying. When it was clear that he would not resist his arrest outside Jerusalem, they simply ran away and left Jesus alone through his dark hours of passion.

Having been condemned to die, we find Jesus carrying a cross down the road to the place where he would hang upon it. We are told that a great number of people lined the roads and followed him along the way, including women who beat their breasts and wailed for him.

In that crowd there was a man named Simon, who had just come into town from the country. His home was in Cyrene, which was a European city in Northern Africa. We don't know much about him other than the fact that he wasn't home -- an important point I'll return to later. Some have suggested that he was part of the large Jewish community living in Cyrene and had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Maybe. Other scholars have claimed they are not so certain since Simon can be either a Jewish or a Gentile name. In Mark's gospel we are told that Simon's sons were Rufus and Alexander, which are definitely Gentile names. So we are

certain only that we are not certain who Simon was. Maybe the point is that Simon could be anyone. Even you.

As Mark tells the story, Simon has just stumbled into this scene. He wasn't in the previous crowd of those shouting for Jesus' death. He didn't know or care about Barabbas, Pilate, or the religious leaders. He was just a man standing in the road who didn't have a clue what all the fuss was about. As he looked upon this crowd, first he must have seen soldiers clearing the way. Then he would have heard some men jeering while some women were wailing in grief. Then he would have seen him -- the man under the burden of the heavy cross.

Suddenly the soldiers seized Simon and dragged him out of the crowd. Then they laid the cross upon his shoulders, making him carry it as he followed Jesus along the road. Remember Jesus words: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Isn't it interesting that in the end the true disciple was not one of those who had been following Jesus for years, but an outsider seized from the crowd and made to carry the cross?

Sooner or later, you will find yourself under the cross beside Simon. You may have thought you were just another face in the crowd, minding your own business. You didn't drag Jesus in front of Pilate or scream for his death. You may not even know who he is. And like Simon, you certainly didn't volunteer to carry a cross. But whatever plans you had for life will one day be suddenly interrupted, seized by something that you didn't plan. Before you know it, a heavy cross has been laid upon your shoulders, and you are traveling a road you never expected to walk.

You were just driving home one day, passing through the intersection, when out of the corner of your eye you saw another car a split second before it hits yours and turns your life upside down. Or you were just taking a shower one ordinary morning when you noticed a lump that hadn't been there. You wonder where this road will lead. Or you were just picking up the phone thinking it was only another telemarketer interrupting your dinner. But you heard your son sobbing on the line, and something seized hold of your life.

Maybe the cross you are bearing hasn't come through a crisis. Maybe it came the day you realized you're getting old, or the day you've attended too many funerals and you realize there is just a lot of loss ahead. Maybe it came the day you realized your life was stuck in a place you hate. You don't know how you let this happen, and you certainly don't know how you can get out of the situation to make it stop happening. All you know is you're dragging a heavy weight upon you shoulders, and it feels like a slow lingering death.

The day you realize that you are walking beneath the cross is an important day in your life because that's the day you confront a great choice. If you want, you can ask yourself "Why me? I was just minding my own business in the crowd." But choosing that won't get you far. The alternative is to look up and see that it is the cross of Jesus you are bearing.

If that is what you choose then you will soon realize this isn't your cross. It belongs to Jesus. You may bear the disease, heartache, or grief for a while. You may even bear the cross all the way across the river of death. Your calling is just to keep following Jesus until he takes the cross back. Eventually you'll discover that he intends to die upon that cross for you that you may have more life than you've ever known. And the reason you were under the cross was only to be changed so you can receive this new life.

It is interesting that none of the gospels tell us exactly why Simon was seized and told to bear Jesus' cross. We have long speculated it is because Jesus was beaten too severely to carry the weight. But we aren't told that. Perhaps the reason Simon had to carry the cross has less to do with Jesus' condition than it does with Simon's. Perhaps it was a grace that Simon got to have his business with life interrupted long enough to be a true disciple, bearing the cross behind Jesus. Because beneath that cross, the most amazing things happen to people.

Ask the people who have been through one of the great crises of life, who discovered a vision of the Savior along the way, and every one of them will tell you the most amazing thing. They will say that they now give thanks for the cross. That's not because it made them stronger or wiser, but because it made them a disciple, like they had never been before. Now they have learned to follow Jesus through change. All things are made new to us the day we realize that Jesus is dying on our cross.

Is this not what Jesus has been promising to his followers all along? He didn't come to give us a few pointers on ethics and better living. He came to transform us as new creations. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "Christianity is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better. Rather it is like turning a horse into a winged creature. . . so it will soar over fences which could have never been jumped." But there is no winged new life apart from dying to the old life that wasn't working anyway. There is no Easter apart from Good Friday.

I'm not saying that everyone who endures hardship will be turned into a new creation. Some just become more cynical and despairing through their trials. I'm saying that everyone who looks up from the cross to follow Jesus discovers Jesus is leading us home, not to Cyrene, but home. And the closer we get to our home with the heavenly Father, the closer we get transformed into the good creations he made of us from the beginning. But there is no way home but through the cross of Jesus.

We are not told what happened to Simon after Jesus took the cross back and died upon it. It is interesting that Mark identifies Simon by his sons, as if they are known to the church. So maybe Simon's family became members of the church. Maybe Simon was the first real disciple of Christ. Maybe he was never the same after bearing Jesus' cross.

May God protect us from the folly of hiding in the crowd this Holy Week. As Jesus walks by in the days ahead, may his Spirit seize us to take our place beneath his cross where we find our lives. Amen.