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## Carrying the Cross – Simon of Cyrene

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A number of people spoke to me about how much they enjoyed learning about different people in the Bible during our last worship series so I decided I would do a couple more sermons based on interesting characters we meet in the scriptures and what they teach us for our own spiritual journeys.

So today I'm going to tell you a story about someone who has one of the most incredible experiences any human being has ever had. The week after Easter our family had a great time on vacation. One of the things we did was visit Aaron Bates, a student at North Carolina State who lived with us last summer while playing in the Cape Cod Baseball League. Looking at NC State's year book which has information about the players, one of the questions they're all asked is, "*Name three people you'd most like to meet.*" One of Aaron's answers was, "*Jesus Christ.*" Probably many of us would say that - how amazing would it be to be close to Jesus, to hear him speak, and to look into his eyes? Well one person got to do all those things at the most difficult moment in Jesus' life, when he was walking the last, painful steps to his death on the cross.

That man's name was Simon and he was from Cyrene, the main city of the Roman colony of Libya, in North Africa. When reading in the Gospels about Jesus' crucifixion, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all state that Simon of Cyrene carried the cross for Jesus when he was simply too weak to bear it any further. Each of the three gospels contributes an important piece of information.

*"As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross."* Matthew 27:32

*"They compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus."*

Mark 15:21

*"As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus."*

Luke 23:26

I mentioned we had a nice trip down to North Carolina, Virginia, and our nation's capital. We had some terrific experiences in Washington DC; every American should visit the capital at least once, there is just so much to see. We had a tour of the capital building; we went inside the Library of Congress and saw one of the three perfect editions of Gutenberg's Bible, the first Bible produced on a printing press, went by The

Supreme Court and the White House and a host of other museums and memorials. We even got to the National Geographic Explorer's Hall and saw fragments from the Judas Gospel. We had been looking forward to this trip for months and months anticipating what it would be like and what we would do. Many of you have probably had a similar experience of looking forward to a significant trip to a special place. Jill and I had a delightful visit at Howie and Sherry Strum's on Wednesday afternoon and Howie told us about just such a trip that he took with his son to Israel where they went on an archeological dig and to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem has been a place to which pilgrims have come for thousands of years. By the time of Jesus, Jews traveled from far and near to come to Jerusalem for festivals and holy days, especially for Passover. Simon of Cyrene was making just such a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but he was doing so in the days before planes, trains, and automobiles. As good as the Roman roads were, as fast as the ships were, it took a lot of time and money to take such a trip.

Any of us who have saved, planned, prepared for, and looked forward to a special trip or a trip of a lifetime can easily relate to Simon. He likely arrived within just the last few days filled with excitement, anticipation, and joy. He will be in the holy city of Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, the festival of remembering the deliverance of God's people from slavery in Egypt. Mark and Luke both mention Simon was coming into Jerusalem from the country, meaning his accommodations were outside the city walls by at least some distance.

Dressed in his finest clothes, I imagine Simon heading toward the gates of Jerusalem and the Temple with quick and determined steps that Friday morning. Having pictured this day in his mind many times, he was totally unprepared for what happened next. However disappointed you may have been by a trip or pilgrimage that you've been on, it could not be worse than what Simon stumbled into. As he approaches Jerusalem a motley crowd is coming his way – there is tension and fear in the air, among the crowd there are women as well as men, there are even religious leaders, some people look angry, the faces of others are pale and contorted by despair, some of the women are even wailing. At the center there are Roman soldiers and the condemned criminal himself. The soldiers want Jesus to go faster, but he has been beaten and whipped, there is a trail of blood on the street that marks his path, he is nearing the end of his strength. He halts and sways under the weight of the heavy beam and the cross bar that will be nailed to it to form the cross. He simply can't go any

further under this burden; he staggers and sinks to the street. The impatient soldiers want to get this awful job over with so they look around to grab someone to help the prisoner. Their eyes fall on someone who wasn't even part of the crowd from Jerusalem, but who was on his way *into* Jerusalem to worship and had simply paused for a moment to see what was going on.

Simon's long anticipated dream trip of a lifetime suddenly turns into a nightmare worse than he could ever have imagined. Put yourself in his place - your mind focused on worship, devotion, and the great celebration at hand when all of a sudden the heavy strong hand of a Roman soldier grasps your shoulder with authority and commands you to pick up the heavy, blood-stained cross.

Of course you are unwilling, repulsed, and seeking to flee. Matthew and Mark both say Simon had to be *compelled* meaning he resisted and perhaps even struggling to get away. One translation of Luke says they "*laid hold*" of him. Simon is forced to submit and has to walk in the midst of a mob of strangers, following a condemned man, ruining his best outfit with a rough, bloodstained heavy beam of wood. From dream to nightmare, from holy day to horrific, from the temple and Jerusalem to a place of execution - Simon walks behind the criminal himself in the midst of the mob following the bloody foot prints. He thinks of his wife and sons and how he will ever tell them about this awful turn of events. (Suddenly getting stuck in traffic or having a flight delayed or cancelled or even getting robbed on one of your trips doesn't seem so bad does it?)

Then something happens that completely changes Simon's feelings. The wailing of women's voices continues and even rises as they near the hill. Slowly Jesus stops, and turning toward the women he says, "*Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.*

*For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?'" Luke 23:28-31.*

It was not just the warning Jesus gave about the fate that awaited sinners if this was the fate of the innocent, but the concern with which he spoke, the compassion in his eyes, the unbelievable inner strength he displayed. When he looked at Simon and their eyes met, Simon felt something inside of him he could not describe. However, he carried the cross with very different feelings from there on.

Now we pause and skip ahead seven weeks, Simon's time at Jerusalem is drawing to a close. He will begin the long journey home shortly after the celebration of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover. Since the experience of carrying the cross Simon has learned a great deal about the prophet from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth and the more he learned the more he wanted to hear about his teaching, parables, healings and even miracles. For weeks stories have been circulating that his body disappeared in the days after his execution. While some scoffed that his disciples had stolen the body, how they could have done so when the tomb was under guard and the tomb sealed by a huge stone no one seemed able to answer. Now on the Day of Pentecost, Simon again comes to Jerusalem around nine o'clock in the morning, the time of the morning sacrifice in the temple, maybe for the last time before his journey home.

Once again he runs into a crowd, but this crowd is very different than the one he encountered on Good Friday. There is excitement, a lot of talking in many different languages, fellow Jews from numerous countries clad in colorful outfits that reflect their homelands. Acts 2:9-11 tells us the crowd includes those from "*the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene.*" At the front of the crowd there are some fairly young men who are speaking in a way that is capturing the attention of the crowd. Just as people are questioning what it all means, one man steps forward, Simon will later learn his name is Peter, and he delivers a powerful message of God's deliverance for all people from their slavery to sin through Jesus who died on the cross that all people might be forgiven.

**Can you conceive of the change that occurred in Simon at that moment?**

This crucified Messiah, this chosen one of God, this Jesus who had been raised from the dead after dying for the sins of the world – SIMON HIMSELF HAD CARRIED HIS CROSS! If only he had known at the time what God was up to and who Jesus was there would have been no reluctance to carry the cross. He would have considered it an honor way beyond him, a privilege beyond calculation.

**Carrying the cross, what Simon thought was the worst possible moment of his life – crushing his dreams and hopes, changing his long made plans – would in fact turn out to be the most remarkable experience of his life.**

Sometimes out of our most difficult trials, ordeals, and disappointments: marriages or relationships that have failed; the death of loved ones, jobs that don't work out, are own declining health, futures that are yet unknown, our struggle to overcome our own temptations and weakness can come life-changing insight and perspective. If God can bring good out of the horror of carrying a condemned man's cross, God can bring

good out of just about anything, if like Simon, we are open to confessing our sin and our need for forgiveness. If like Simon and those first 3,000 souls who gave themselves to Christ on that first Pentecost, we are willing to dedicate ourselves to a personal relationship with Jesus in which we seek to let him be our guide and teacher in every aspect of our lives. Simon of Cyrene heard Peter invite everyone (Acts 2:38-39), *“Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”* Almost certainly Simon was one of the 3,000 souls who heard and believed and had the joy of being forgiven and the power of the Holy Spirit strengthening him to live his new life.

I want to conclude by conveying one more picture – can you imagine Simon back home again in Cyrene, his long planned, memorable visit to Jerusalem over? It has been the experience of his life, he returns a changed man. What a story he has to tell his family and friends! No pilgrim in history ever had a more amazing story to tell and his wife and sons can listen to it by the hour and they never tire of hearing it. They shudder as he tells of being forced by the soldiers to carrying the cross to the hill where the execution took place. He tells them all about the prisoner, his words, his bearing, and everything else that took place. His family sits amazed as Simon relates what happened on Pentecost. He tells them of his conversion and in the process he leads his wife and sons to faith in Jesus as well.

We know this because Mark 15:21 tells us Simon was *“the father of Alexander and Rufus.”* Mark’s gospel was written 25-30 years after Simon’s experience in Jerusalem. The fact that Mark is the only Gospel writer who mentions Alexander and Rufus, without any need to explain who they are, indicates they were well known persons among those for whom Mark was writing. The sons were by then more well known than their father and that’s why Mark explains the family connection. Acts 12:12, describes his mother’s home in Jerusalem which was large enough so that a good number of people could gather to pray and a Greek servant is mentioned so they were probably people of means. Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas, then Barnabas, and later with Paul again. Eventually Mark is in Rome with Paul (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24) and the last reference to Mark in the New Testament is in 2 Timothy 4:11 which is a request from Paul that Mark should return to him at Rome. Mark was a Roman citizen

as well and probably settled in Rome. It is very likely Mark wrote his gospel in Rome primarily for people who knew Simon's sons Alexander and Rufus.

We know this also from Paul's letter to the believers in Rome because in Romans 16:13, we read Paul's personal greeting, "*Greet **Rufus**, chosen in the Lord; and greet **his mother – a mother to me also.***" There is no other Rufus in the New Testament and it looks like the apostle Paul was a guest in the home of Rufus' mother or that she mothered him in some way or somewhere during his missionary journeys. Apparently Simon has died during the intervening years and according to tradition Alexander had suffered martyrdom as a Christian missionary by the time Paul wrote Romans.

**It is pretty amazing to think that out of what Simon of Cyrene must have thought was the worst possible experience of his life actually began a whole new phase in his life.** It began a deeper, truer life of faith, and a more honest appraisal of himself and his own sin. It started a personal relationship with Jesus and a dependence on the Spirit of God in daily life. Out of the deepest, darkest shadow experience of his life came eventually the greatest meaning and a new destiny as he and his family were greatly used by God in the first critical years of the growth of the Christian movement.

It all began with carrying the cross.

Like Simon we too can learn to carry our cross. We can say as Paul did, "*And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" Galatians 2:20

Like Simon we can pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

As Simon shared his faith with his family, we can share what God has done for us with our family and with those who are close to us.

When you look at the cross, of course, think of God's love and forgiveness for you, and Jesus' sacrifice for you, perhaps think every now and then about Simon of Cyrene. Andrew Murray said about the cross,

*"As you gaze upon the cross, and long for conformity to him, be not weary or fearful because you cannot express in words what you seek. Ask him to plant the cross in your heart. Believe in him, the crucified and now living one, to dwell within you, and breathe his own mind there."*