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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Palm/Passion Sunday, March 24, 2024
Mark 14:1 - 15:47
The Cross Is Heavy

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Passion story we have just read speaks of a passer-by, Simon of Cyre'ne. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all speak of this man. The soldiers compel Simon to carry the cross of Jesus. On this solemn day, let us strive, going forward in life, to take our turn carrying that cross. Simon seems to have carried the cross all the way to Golgotha, where the soldiers crucified Jesus. Simon carried that cross as best he could. Through the long centuries behind us, Christians have taken over for Simon and have carried the cross of Christ. And now, in our generation, it is our turn.

This carrying of the cross is the right thing for us because of the clear teaching of Jesus:

³⁴And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Mark 8:34, KJV)

Simon took up the cross in his generation. Now, it is our turn, for the rest of our lives.

Earlier this week, Carol and I placed our rugged cross here in the chancel, leaning it up against the altar. This is a preview of our Good Friday service a few days down the road. For thirty years, I have carried that rugged cross from the narthex up the center aisle, pausing three times to chant this line:

Behold the life-giving cross on which was hung the
salvation of the whole world.

And the congregation answers:

Oh come, let us worship him.

As I have gotten older, I have wondered year-by-year whether I would be able to carry that cross and to place it in the chancel, because I am not as strong as I used to be. This year especially, I somewhat doubt myself. This past Friday, a couple days ago, I had back surgery. It was minor surgery — in and out of the hospital that same day — still, my back hurts from the incision and I wonder

whether I will be strong enough later this week to carry the cross this Good Friday. The surgeon told me not to lift anything more than five pounds, and I think that cross weighs more than that.

If I cannot carry the cross, then I will have to ask Pastor Carol or Pastor Lara to carry that cross for me. But I am an old-fashioned guy. My first instinct about that is that “Women should not have to carry a cross!” But upon reflection, I find myself saying, “But women *do* bear the cross — often better than men do.” So, if need be, I bet Carol or Lara will carry the cross for us this Good Friday.

One way or the other — whether it is a man or a woman carrying the cross, or whether the person is young or old — one way or the other, the cross is heavy! When Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow him, he is not speaking of a romantic idea. The cross is not that. It is not a romantic idea. Instead, it is heavy. Or at least, often it is heavy. It can age you. It can cause you to lose sleep in the nighttime. It can cause you to collapse.

I bet the soldiers knew that that is what would happen to Jesus if he had to carry his cross to Golgotha. They figured that Jesus would collapse, and so they recruited our Simon the Cyrene to carry the cross for Jesus. Jesus had been arrested in the nighttime, when his soul was already very sorrowful, almost to death. He had been interrogated that night by the council of elders and the high priest, who condemned him as being worthy of death. The guards had treated Jesus roughly then. And so we read:

And they all condemned him as deserving death. ⁶⁵And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” And the guards received him with blows. (Mark 14:64-65, RSV)

That made for an exhausting nighttime.

Then in the early morning, the chief priests and council send Jesus off to be interrogated by Pilate. You know how that turned out:

¹⁵So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barab’bas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified. (Mark 15:15, RSV)

Notice that word “scourged.” Pilate had Jesus scourged. That meant, whipped. Some people died under scourging, it was so brutal.

The night before, the guards had treated Jesus roughly. Now the soldiers tear into him. They too mistreat our beaten and bruised Lord Jesus:

¹⁶And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the praetorium); and they called together the whole

battalion. ¹⁷And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. ¹⁸And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ¹⁹And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him. ²⁰And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him. (Mark 15:16-20, RSV)

If that cross was to reach Golgotha, it makes sense that Jesus was not going to be able to carry it. So, they compel Simon of Cyrene to do the job. Now, again, I say, it is our turn, in our generation.

To bear our cross means to accept whatever we must as we follow Jesus. For parents, it might mean exhausting work when they would rather be resting. It might mean tears and prayers in the nighttime, worrying about their little ones. For workers in the world, it means integrity on the job. We will not cut corners, we will not do shabby work, we will give fair labor for our wages. For each of us, it means that we will do again what we have done this morning: We have gotten up, had our oatmeal, and headed to church, for fellowship with one another and with our risen Lord Jesus. To the tempted one, bearing the cross means that we say of ourselves what Peter said of Jesus: I know not the man! That is, when temptation comes along, we will prefer Jesus even to ourselves. We would rather know Jesus and his ways than to know ourselves and our old ways. For timid people, bearing the cross might well mean that there comes a point where you just have to stand up for what is right. It means being brave and doing the right thing, no matter how wildly and fearfully the heart might be beating. For people with hate in their hearts, it means reconsidering the matter, searching for a kinder interpretation of things. For the sinner, bearing the cross means repenting of the sin. For the righteous, it means some mercy and pity for the sinner. For the bus rider in our city, it means paying your fare, no matter what everyone else does. It means giving up your seat for an elderly or pregnant woman. It means practicing courtesy and doing what we can to make this a better city. In big matters and little ones, taking up our cross means doing what we must that we not be knocked off our following of Jesus. It means that we take over the cross from Simon of Cyrene and carry that cross forward in our generation, come what may.

But if we do this, if we carry our cross through thick and thin, it will be good of us, but only a faint shadow of the real cross of Christ. He was nailed to that cross. He died on that cross. He suffered the rejection of the highest people in his society. He was mocked by the crowds. His disciples fled from him. And he suffered it all *innocently*. It is one thing to suffer, admitting for ourselves what the thief on the right hand admitted of himself. He rebuked

the thief on the left — the one who joined in tormenting Jesus. But the thief on the right knows the truth about Jesus and about himself, and so we read:

⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?

⁴¹And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” (Luke 23:40-41, RSV)

It is one thing, I say, to suffer knowing that in some true measure, you deserve it. It is something else, to have lived a holy life, to have loved everyone in sight, and to die bearing the contempt of the world.

Love did it all. Love bore it all. For God so loved, that he gave his only begotten Son (John 3:16), and the Son so loved that he accepted that cross, that you and I might live — even to the degree of having life everlasting.

One part of what Easter means is that Jesus continues to bid us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. When he first spoke those words, he addressed them to his twelve disciples. But he lives here and now and he is addressing them to us too: Let us, then, do, and let us accept, whatever we must that we might be true to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.