

Palm Sunday 2019
Saint Mary's Church, Richmond
Fr. Michael Renninger

He was minding his own business. But he ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time... or so it seemed.

He was from a town called Cyrene, on the coast of Libya. It took about 6 weeks to walk from Cyrene to Jerusalem.

Every Jewish person wanted to go to Jerusalem for Passover, at least once in their lives. Luke's Gospel says that on a certain Friday 2000 years ago, a man named Simon was coming into Jerusalem 'from the country.' Perhaps he had just arrived in Jerusalem for his once in a lifetime Passover pilgrimage. If that was the case, his heart must have been filled with excitement. The kind of excitement I felt the first time I saw St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, or the first time I walked through the doors of Graceland on my pilgrimage to see "the King."

Simon must have been thrilled to be in Jerusalem, praying that this would be a holy Passover feast.

Now, Jerusalem was always crowded at Passover... but this crowd was *different*. People were shouting, "Crucify him!" They were angry.

Others in the crowd seemed sad. As Simon looked around, perhaps he saw a woman named Mary, who was crying out, "My son!" Perhaps Simon saw a man whose skin was perfect – that man was shouting, "He healed my leprosy!"

Simon was stuck in the middle of this strange crowd. The wrong place at the wrong time?

You know how scary crowds are... they push you along... take you in a direction you don't want to go.

And then... then Simon feels a strong hand grabbing him by the arm. A Roman soldier! Simon just wanted to get to the Jewish temple – now he's in the grip of a sweaty soldier!

And then... Simon sees a man did not know. A man hardly recognizable because of the blood. Simon felt sick. The man too weak to carry his cross. Why had they beaten him? Why the crown of thorns? He was losing so much blood – would they even need to crucify him?

Then, Simon realizes that the crowd is now shouting at him. The sweaty soldier says something

that makes no sense:

“*Carry the cross.*”

“What?”

“*Carry the cross.*”

Maybe Simon tried to complain, but Roman soldiers expected obedience. So Simon picks up the cross. A cross he did not deserve. A cross that made no sense.

He was probably angry. And frightened. And disappointed. And confused. All at the same time.

And then... *they started to walk*. Simon, and Jesus. Both of them suffering. Both burdened. But both of them kept going, one step at a time. Did they say anything to each other? We don't know. But perhaps Simon recognized that Jesus was no ordinary man, or that Jesus did not deserve all of this.

And perhaps, later in life, Simon remembered Good Friday in a different light. He thought he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But maybe he was in the *right* place at the *right* time.

Maybe every human being has a moment when the cross is handed to us. We don't deserve it. It makes no sense. It confuses and frightens us. Then one thing becomes clear – *we are not walking alone*.

As Simon carried the cross, he was walking with Jesus. As you carry your cross, *you* are walking with Jesus. *Look* for him. That's where peace and strength are found.

Now, to be clear, there are times in life when I do the wrong thing, and I experience suffering because of my bad decisions. That's not a 'cross' – that's called taking responsibility for my choices!

But then there are days when I am minding my own business. I try to do what's right. Like Simon, I've tried to be faithful to my religion... and then, the cross gets handed to me. *And it makes no sense*.

A cross is only *really* a cross when the one who carries it can honestly shout to God, “I don't deserve this.”

Jesus didn't deserve the crucifixion. But it happened. Simon didn't deserve to carry the cross. But it happened.

You don't 'deserve' your cancer, your pulmonary fibrosis, your depression... you don't deserve the loss of your job, your spouse abandoning you, your family crisis... you don't deserve broken hearts, broken dreams, abuse, suffering. But it happens. The cross gets handed to you.

And you pick it up. And you put one foot in front of the other. And you slowly realize – *I am not walking alone.*

The One who is bloody is walking beside me. The One whose hands were nailed is waving me forward. The One whose heart was pierced with a sword is loving me in ways I never paid attention to before. And the One who rose from the dead is promising me that I will rise too.

Simon was in the right place at the right time. How else could he have discovered that this undeserved cross was the tool God would use to reveal the closeness of Jesus? And how else could God teach Simon that the greatest gift we can give to one another is to help our brother and sister carry *their* crosses?

Surely, Simon spent the rest of his life paying attention to the folks in the crowd around him. Surely Simon paid attention to the people who were burdened by the unfairness of life. If Simon ever saw another person struggling under the weight of an undeserved cross, he would not need a sweaty Roman soldier to tell him what to do.

“Pick it up. Help them carry it. You're not alone.” *No one should be.*