

Good Friday: Mark 15:1-47  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **Being a Crucifer**

The Bible is big on little people, people who don't have a particularly large part. A colleague of mine once made a list of all the people who are mentioned in the Bible who only get about one or two verses, and it came out to a rather long list. These people, though briefly mentioned, walk onto the stage of Scripture, are given a word or two, and then recede into the background. Yet their presence is one of the reasons why the Bible sounds so realistic and believable to us. For our lives are full of little people like these, people who touch our lives every day in various ways. Fact is, *we* are little people ourselves. Most of us are not going to be famous, never going to grace the cover of Time Magazine. And yet there does seem to be something about God that loves little people, that enjoys doing big things through ordinary folk like us.

Such is the case with Simon of Cyrene. Simon doesn't have a large part to play. In fact, when a student actor at a college sought to tell the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion, he asked my colleague the chaplain if he could make a small change. He wanted to cut out the part of Simon of Cyrene, because it was just a short little part, but it messed up the flow of the story. "Things are so dramatic," he explained, "with the arrest of Jesus, his trial, and now they are leading him to his cross. It is all very emotional, very moving, but there's this bit about a guy who's pulled out of the crowd and pressed into carrying his cross. It just doesn't work, dramatically speaking."

My colleague told the student to go ahead and leave Simon in. He may not work, "dramatically speaking," but he certainly works, spiritually speaking.

The chaplain was right. Simon is important. He only makes a brief appearance but it is momentous. At first, Simon was just a face in the crowd, going about his business. He's from Cyrene, we are told, in modern-day Libya, North Africa, and had come to Jerusalem, we assume, with the other pilgrims for the celebration of Passover. Beyond that, we don't know anything about his background or his motives. There is certainly nothing to indicate that he had any particular intentions to get mixed up with Jesus. All he was doing was standing on the sidewalk, watching the parade go by.

And some parade it was. At the head was Jesus, carrying a heavy crossbeam, which would be hoisted onto a post or dead tree to make the cross on which he would be hung. Jesus had already been beaten nearly to death, and scourged within an inch of his life. Now, in one last act of humiliation, he's been forced to drag his own cross up Golgotha, while mocking crowds jeered and taunted him.

Jesus is exhausted by his ordeal, and the weight of the burden is too much for him and he stumbles. A Roman soldier reaches into the crowd and pulls out Simon, demanding that Simon take up Jesus' cross and carry it. And he does. That's all we know about Simon. But it is all we need to know.

For already, in this little vignette, we recognize that Simon's experience fits a pattern of discipleship many of us are familiar with. I mean, I'm sure there are some people who follow Jesus after making a long and thoughtful study of Christianity's major beliefs. Or, upon reading Scripture, listening to a sermon, or participating in a Bible study, they become convicted and convinced of some great Christian duty that needs to be done. But in my experience, such people are rare.

More common is the experience of minding your own business, watching the parade go by, when all of sudden you're called out. You're no "religious fanatic," no saint either, truth be told. You have some respect for religion, some vague inclination toward things spiritual, but that's about the extent of it. Maybe someday, you figure, you might read the Bible or attend a worship service, maybe even get involved. But then, quite despite yourself, you are called out and drafted into the Lord's service.

That was Simon of Cyrene, who was minding his own business until one fateful moment, a Roman soldier, who had no use for these fanatical Jews anyway, called him out of the crowd and said, "You standing there, come over here and carry this cross up there. And be quick about it, or we'll find a cross for you, too." So Simon stepped out of the crowd, came forward, and helped Jesus carry his cross.

You might have thought that Jesus' disciples would have been there to help. After all, in the Upper Room, they had promised to stick by him no matter what. But when the going got tough, the tough were...well, nowhere to be found. If his disciples were anywhere, they "followed at a distance." There was no one to help Jesus bear his cross up Calvary, nobody except this stranger, this Simon of Cyrene.

Simon, a nobody, not a disciple, not a Jesus-follower, who, as far as we know, never heard Jesus preach or teach. Maybe he didn't even know what Jesus was about. Yet he bore the cross of Jesus, took up the cross of Jesus as if it were his own. Simon, the first cross-bearer, the first crucifer.

Even if you don't know Simon, I bet some of you here know what he went through. You or someone else you know has been that bystander who was, in some stunning moment, called to carry the cross. The call comes, maybe not from Jesus himself, but from someone else, someone maybe who wasn't even a Christian themselves.

Maybe you work for a boss whom you discover is skirting some laws and when you confront him, he fires you for not being a "team player." Or you see a homeless man sleeping under a bridge every day on your way to work, and you feel a tug on your heart. Or a single mother moves into the house next door and every time you see her with her children, she appears harried and exhausted and in need of help. Or your elderly neighbor down the hall from your unit is sick but has no one to check on them. Or you see some injustice, hear some untruth, and wonder if you should say something, knowing that it would be unwelcome and unpopular. Just like that, you go from minding your own business, to being called into God's service, given a cross to carry.

You know, Christians today are so quick to tout the rewards of following Jesus—a sense of peace, purpose in life, an ethical framework to follow, social support. All of which are good and right. But what we don't often say is in choosing to follow Jesus, you are choosing the cross. The cross, which is more than just a symbol, or decoration we use in the church or on jewelry worn around our neck. The cross is what the world did to Jesus and what the world does to those who would follow him.

Indeed, Jesus did not carry his cross alone. Simon was ordered to help him. Simon, the first crucifer, first cross-bearer. His story is warning, a warning to all of us who are content to stand on the sidelines this week, content to watch unmoved, unaffected as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, gets whipped, spat upon, and then made to carry his own cross. Even if we don't intend to get involved, there's a chance that the world, in one way or another, will call us out. For walk along with Jesus long enough, and you can trust that, at some point, you'll be asked to take up the cross, to become a crucifer too...Amen.