

THE PASSER-BY

Mark 15:21-32

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson,
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
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"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

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

Mark tells us that, as the Roman soldiers were leading Jesus and the two criminals to the place of crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem, "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." Who was Simon? Why was he there? Why is he mentioned? Why are the names of his sons, Alexander and Rufus, mentioned? What happened to Simon afterwards? We find the answers to these questions if we read between the lines using our imagination. *Simon was a Jew. Simon* is a common Jewish name. He came to Jerusalem from Cyrene in North Africa (Libya) to celebrate the Passover. We can imagine Simon approaching the gates of Jerusalem on a sunny, warm Spring morning when he met a parade coming out of Jerusalem. The parade was *not* like the Palm Sunday parade a few days earlier. This was a hangman's parade - a shouting crowd, Roman soldiers in shining helmets, and three wretched convicts staggering under the weight of the heavy crossbeams they were forced to carry to the place of their execution. All of sudden, Simon found himself right in the middle of the parade. At that very moment three things happened to Simon, three momentous, life-changing events. He confronted Christ. He was compelled to carry the cross. He was converted.

First, Simon confronted Christ. Simon, unexpectedly, met Jesus face to face that morning. He didn't know who Jesus was. He didn't know what Jesus had done or why he was marching to crucifixion. He knew nothing of his teaching or his ministry. Simon was confronted by a man despised and rejected, a man of suffering, horribly disfigured with a crown of thorns and a swollen body bruised and bleeding. Simon unexpectedly met Jesus Christ that morning. *Each of us is destined to meet Jesus some time and some place.* And what will do with him? How will we respond? Those of you who are being publicly received into the membership of the Oxford Presbyterian Church this morning have confronted Jesus Christ. You've turned to Jesus Christ and accepted him as your Lord and Savior. You've promised to be his faithful disciple. But this is not the end of your pilgrimage. It's only the beginning. And hopefully in the coming months and years you'll come to know better Christ whom you've confronted.

Secondly, Simon was compelled to carry Christ's cross. No sooner had Simon confronted Jesus, Jesus fell and lay on the ground pinned beneath the cross. Jesus fell, weakened terribly by his scourging. He'd never be able to carry the cross up the hill. The soldiers knew this. *They* certainly weren't going to carry his cross. So they grabbed Simon and compelled him to carry the cross. "Pick up that cross!" "No way!" Simon must have protested. "Don't you know it's pollution for a Jew to touch a cross?" But the outraged Roman centurion looked him in the eye, "Pick up that cross now! When Rome commands, Rome is obeyed! I command you in the name of Caesar, take up that cross!" Before Simon knew what was happening, hands were laid on him, the crossbeam was on his shoulder and the procession continued to the place of crucifixion. *We're also called to take up a cross and follow Christ.* Church membership is not a privilege but a responsibility. Joining the church is not like joining a country club where we can be members as long as we pay our dues. We have a cross to carry. We're called to help Christ. We have jobs to accomplish. We have a ministry, each of us. People to pray for daily. Sick people and shut-ins to visit. Worship bulletins to fold and hand out. Visitors to greet. Mission projects. Hungry people to feed. Prisoners to visit. Tithes and offerings to contribute. The gospel to share with others. When we're confronted with Christ, the love of Christ compels us to take up a cross and follow him.

Thirdly, Simon was converted to Christ. We don't know when. We don't know how. St. Luke tells us in the book of Acts of a Christian leader from Cyrene named Simeon Niger, or Black Simon. Almost certainly this is the very Simon compelled to carry Christ's cross. Not only was Simon converted to Christ, his wife and sons became Christians. We infer this because Mark mentions his sons by name. The only reason Mark does this is because Alexander and Rufus became well known Christians in the early church. St. Paul writes in Romans, chapter 16, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; and greet his mother - a mother to me also." So we infer that Simon was converted, went back home to Africa and shared the Gospel with his wife and children and they, too, were converted to Christ. *The great hope of our church is that every member will so live and share the faith that their entire family will come to worship and serve Christ.*

Confronted! Compelled! Converted! When we join the church we're saying to the world, I've confronted Christ! I'm compelled to take up my cross and follow Christ! I've been converted to Jesus Christ! Amen.

Let us pray: