**A Pilgrimage of Hope: A Burden Shared**

**Mark 15:16-22**

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 Our pilgrimage of hope this Lenten season is taking us on a virtual tour of the Stations of the Cross – although there are not enough Sundays in Lent to cover all the stations. As we have mentioned, in Jerusalem there is what is known as the Via Dolorosa. It is the Way of Suffering, which tradition says is the way Jesus walked to his crucifixion, from the Antonia Fortress where Pilate condemned him, to what is now the Church of the Sepulchre, where it is traditionally thought Jesus was crucified. It really isn’t very far, but far enough to take Jesus outside the walls of the city at the time, for they were not allowed to crucify people within the walls of Jerusalem.

 Many of you have heard my conversion story. I thought going to Israel and Jerusalem as a Christian pilgrimage was a silly thing to do. My theology tells me that God is bigger than time and place – which I still believe – and so honoring a specific place and time of God’s movement seemed a bit like idolatry to me. However, having gone now a couple of times, it really does make Scripture come alive. It helps us put into perspective the stories of our faith; not necessarily in a spectacular way, but sometimes understanding the ordinariness of it, which somehow makes it even more real and wonderful.

 So I want to try to give you a flavor of that experience through Uncle Doug’s Slide Show. Unfortunately, if you ever have taken a picture of the Grand Canyon to share its grandeur with your family and friends, you know how woefully inept pictures can be to translate the visceral feeling of actually being there.

*(Apologies for those who might be reading this sermon that the pictures are not included. However, perhaps the descriptions of the pictures will be helpful as well.)*

1. This is Jerusalem: I asked God to transport me through time and space so that I could get a bird’s eye view of Jerusalem.

Of course, that didn’t happen. But this is the next best thing. A giant model of Jerusalem was built so everyone could understand its geography.

2. This is the wide angle view of the model. You can see people on the left walking around it, so you can get an understanding of its size.

3. This is the Temple Mount with the Temple in the center. The Holy of Holies is the tall part of the Temple. The Kidron Valley runs in front of the Temple Mount. It is on this side of the valley where the Garden of Gethsemane is. The Antonia Fortress is at the upper right corner of the Temple Mount. You can see it there with the four columns. This is where Pilate condemned Jesus to be flogged and crucified, and the beginning of the Via Dolorosa.

4. This is part of the Garden of Gethsemane.

5. This is a bit farther up from the Garden, perhaps not too far from where Bethphage might have been located. This looks across the Kidron Valley to the Temple Mount. Instead of the Temple, there is now a Mosque that you see, informally known as the dome of the Rock – the big gold dome there. This is the third holiest place for Islam, where tradition says this is the place that Mohammed was taken up to heaven. Just in front of the Dome you can barely see a set of arches. Take note. There will be a picture from there in a moment.

6. Looking up at the Easter Gate, or the Golden Gate of the Temple Mount. You can barely see the tip of the dome of the Mosque.

7. Here are the arches I told you to take note of. We are now on the Temple Mount looking east over the Kidron Valley where the Garden of Gethsemane is.

8. This is toward the beginning of the Via Dolorosa. Notice the old arches being consumed by newer buildings.

9. Toward the beginning of the Via Dolorosa, you can go into a building and take these stair cases down a couple of flights. There you come to what is probably the original street during Jesus’ time.

10. And there it is – the original street.

11. These are some of the paving stones that date back to the time of Jesus. These may be some of the stones that Jesus actually walked on. Remember, this is two stories below the present day streets of Jerusalem

12. Back on top on today’s streets on the Via Dolorosa. It shows you how narrow the streets are.

13. Our guide, Hannah. This is from the first trip that I did.

14. With Mark Baily, showing that U of M is everywhere. There are little shops all along the way. Most are for daily living, but some are for the tourists to buy souvenirs. You can even get a U of M t-shirt in Hebrew.

15. And you end up at the Church of the Sepulchre, built over the spot where tradition says Jesus was crucified.

16. I want to back up to Station 3 of the Stations of the Cross. This is how they are marked along the way, and this is my favorite for this reason. In the forefront you can see Station 3. Notice the Roman numeral III and the relief of Jesus carrying the cross. Is that how you envision Jesus carrying the cross? Take note because we will come back to it later. Notice what else is in the picture. On the left is a minuet of a Mosque. And way far in the back, which you might not be able to see in this picture is…

17. A menorah. Can you see it there?

18. In this picture in Old Jerusalem are the symbols of the 3 Abrahamic faiths. I love it.

19. This is a map of Old Jerusalem today. You can see the Temple Mount on your right, and farther right is the Kidron Valley almost to the Garden of Gethsemane. The Via Dolorosa starts at the top, left hand corner of the Temple Mount where the Antonia Fortress was, heading west to the Church of the Sepulchre.

 Hopefully that gives you a bit of insight as we talk about the Stations of the Cross and the Via Dolorosa, and the geography of Jerusalem.

 So far Nancy and I have preached on the first and fourth Stations of the Cross. The first one is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying that this cup pass by him, but only as God wills it. The fourth station is Peter denying knowing Jesus. We are now jumping to Station 8, where Simon the Cyrene is conscripted to carry the cross for Jesus.

 This scene in Scripture is full of lore and tradition. You remember this scene. Jesus has been imprisoned for the night and flogged so we can understand that he might be weak and it would be hard to carry the cross. What we’ve been taught is that Jesus attempted to carry the cross, but along the way could not continue. The soldiers made Simon the Cyrene carry it the rest of the way. In fact, in one of the older versions of the Stations of the Cross, it has Jesus stumbling with the cross three times before Simon is conscripted. However, none of that is in the Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Simon is instructed to carry the cross at the very beginning of the walk to the crucifixion. The Gospel of John makes a point that Jesus carried the cross by himself the whole way.

 The other lore that we must correct is that Jesus (or Simon) carried the whole cross. That isn’t what happened. The accused only carried the cross beam of the cross – the horizontal piece, not the vertical piece. So the reality is that Jesus may never have carried the cross at all, and definitely not the whole “T” shaped cross.

 Now, does that change anything about our faith? Of course not. But I do think it is important to understand to the best of our ability what really happened.

 What do we know of Simon the Cyrene? The nice thing about the Bible is that it usually references a person by where they are from, so we know that Simon is from Northern Africa, Cyrene, which is located in eastern part of modern-day Libya. Cyrene was one of the big, important cities in its heyday, under both the Greek and Roman empires. It is located about six miles south of the Mediterranean Sea and about 2,000 feet above sea level, which made Cyrene a very verdant place. It was known for its exports of herbs and spices that were in great demand, especially the herb Silphium, which was used for medicinal purposes.

 In the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Christian Church, St. Mark (whose Gospel we read for our lesson today) was its founder and a native of Cyrene. He also ordained the first bishop of Cyrene. North Africans from Cyrene were also part of the crowd that got caught up in the Spirit’s movement on Pentecost, according to Acts 2:10.

 There was a large community of Jews that lived in Cyrene. Often Jews from around the Mediterranean communities made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the major religious Holidays. So it would not have been unusual for Simon to be there for the Passover. It would not have been strange that Cyrenians were found among those in Acts who experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It was at the time of Shavuot, a harvest holiday, as well as the celebration of when God gave Moses and the Israelites the Torah.

 So what we know about Simon has more to do with what we know of the place from which he came. However, the Gospel of Mark includes one other tidbit of information that the other Gospels exclude. Mark says that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. It leads us to believe that Alexander and Rufus were well known in the Christian community to whom Mark was writing his Gospel. Is it the same Rufus who Paul requests to pass on greetings to and his mother, in Romans 16:13?

 That is all we know of Simon the Cyrene, except that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Or was he in the right place at the wrong time? Or the wrong place at the right time? Or maybe he was in the right place at the right time.

 It seems evident through tradition that Jesus was in no shape to carry his own cross. He was up all night, whipped, taunted and mocked. . Simon happened to be close enough for the soldiers conscript to carry the cross for Jesus. Why had Simon been hanging around so closely? Did he know Jesus? Was he curious about the hullabaloo going on? We’ll never know. But he was there. And he picked up the cross and followed Jesus.

 There are some who like to make that connection. When Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone whishes to be my disciple, let them take up their cross and follow me,” they lift Simon up as the example of that teaching. And if his sons were known in the Christian community, then perhaps that is what happened.

 But what I take out of this quick little passage that almost seems like a side comment in the passion narrative is that everybody, now and again, needs help. Jesus was not excluded. Sometimes we like to deify Jesus so much that we put him in a place where he doesn’t need anything, and there certainly isn’t anything we can do for Jesus. He’s the Son of God, after all – all powerful, all knowing.

 But, even Jesus needed help. Even Jesus needed community. Even Jesus needed friends to lean on when it just seemed impossible to move forward. And when that literally happened, Simon was there to help carry the cross that has become the sign of our redemption.

 And Jesus still needs our help to carry that redemption to the people we know and the people we meet, and the people we don’t know and the people we dislike. We help carry the cross of redemption when we help carry the burdens of our fellow pilgrims along life’s way, and when they help carry our burdens. That is why the Church is as important today as it ever has been. God needs community. God needs you and me to be in community. When we share one another’s burden, we are sharing in the work of redemption.

 I’m not sure Simon knew that is what he was doing. Often that is the way redemption works. But he was there when God’s work of redemption needed him the most.

 I pray that will be true in your life and in mine. Amen.