

**Sunday, April 10, 2022**  
**Palm/Passion Sunday (Year C)**

Luke 22.14—23.56

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1085707408680191>

*(Sermon begins at about 40:30)*

**“The Right Place at the Right Time”**

Today, with Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we formally begin our journey through Holy Week. Where we witness Jesus’ final days. Where we witness his Passion—his betrayal, his arrest, his trial, his torture, his sentencing to death, his journey along the Via Dolorosa to Golgotha, his execution. On Palm Sunday, or what is sometimes referred to as Passion Sunday, we are provided with an overview of the week’s events. Giving us the lay of the land. And then, throughout the remainder of the week, on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, we delve more deeply into the events of those days.

Looking at the arc of events, this year I find there is one verse, one image, in today’s Passion Narrative that has captured my attention. Focusing on a single person. One who, in many ways, serves as a guide for what will happen. Not so much a guide through the week, but one who can serve as a guide for understanding what this means for us and our lives of faith. “As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus.” (Lk 23.26). Simon of Cyrene. An obscure character, to say the least. Yet, as we shall see, one who serves as an exemplar for how we can begin to approach the horrific events of this week and help us to be transformed by them.

So, who was Simon? Really, all we know about him is contained in that one verse. He was a man from Cyrene, a city in eastern Libya. That’s all we know for sure. Although, the Gospel according to Mark notes that he was “the father of Alexander and Rufus” (Mk 15.21). Nonetheless, despite knowing nothing about Simon, he is important enough to be the subject, not just of a mention in three of the four Gospels, but also of the fifth station in the Stations of the Cross, the iconic ritual enactment of Christ’s Passion. The means by which we, in our own way, are able to enter more fully, more contemplatively, into the events we just heard.

While we cannot know for sure, one of the questions scholars ponder is: how did Simon come to be on the Via Dolorosa that fateful day? Some argue that he may have been a Jew—there was a sizeable Jewish community in Cyrene at that time, and there was even a Cyrenian synagogue in Jerusalem. So, Simon may have been in Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover and just happened to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time and been coerced into helping Jesus carry his cross. Others note that Simon may have actually been a follower of Jesus. That, like Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus, he stood nearby, watching the horrific events of Good Friday unfold. Unlike the disciples who seemed to be noticeably absent for this part of the Passion. Regardless, Simon was there. Simon played his part in the Passion. One of the few positive roles played.

The Rev. Dr. Barbara Holmes has written a book entitled *Joy Unspeakable*, which explores and analyzes the contemplative practices of the Black church. In this book, she writes about the Black church's use of various biblical stories that serve as "contemplative texts [that] have been reserved for occasions that require the ritual amelioration of sorrow, suffering, or death."<sup>1</sup> One such story is that of Simon of Cyrene. An African who witnessed firsthand the sorrow, suffering, and death of our Lord. Simon, who experienced, through his own actions, sorrow and suffering. Sorrow and suffering that we, even now, share in. Of Simon's role, Holmes ponders:

How do you respond when you are asked to do what the Savior cannot? This is the one called Yeshua the Messiah, the one who came to save and redeem. Yet, he staggers in the dirt as you move into place and lift the solid wood to your shoulders. As you bend under the weight, you realize that this vulnerable God is totally human even as he is completely divine. He looks at you and smiles with such love that you no longer feel the pain. There is a contemplative rhythm to your movement, a silent dialogue with each step. Without saying a word, you are caring for each other.<sup>2</sup>

Simon, providing a moment of relief, maybe even of comfort, during the darkest, most painful moments of Jesus' life. We don't often think of Jesus needing relief, of needing comfort. But Simon's actions on that Good Friday provide a model for all of us on our own faith journeys, in our own relationships with Jesus.

Looking back on the events of that Good Friday, in light of what happens over the succeeding days, we know what Jesus has done for us. What he has accomplished for us. What he continues to do for us. The weight he carries. Not just the weight of the cross. The weight of our sins. The weight of our own troubles. The weight of the world. So maybe there are times when Jesus might appreciate a little relief, a little comfort. No matter how small it may seem.

What do we do with this realization? What is our response to this and to the new reality that Christ has secured for us? That we so easily live into and take for granted? Simon knew the answer. Simon demonstrated the answer. That a single person can ease Christ's burden, even if only for a few moments. That is what we are called to do in our own lives of faith, in our own ministries. To seek ways that we can ease Christ's burden. Barbara Holmes reflects on the lessons the Black church has learned in this arena. Lessons the Black church has learned from Simon of Cyrene. Holmes writes:

This pericope models the true nature of servant leadership. Here Simon the African suffers as a servant as he shares the burden with the suffering servant. If he is not a disciple before this act, he is now, for he is walking with Jesus in ways that none of the others have. He is a parabolic symbol of how the church should lead. The people with Jesus at the end are not the clearly identified disciples (learners who never quite seem to learn) but rather the people whose insight and understanding have been sharpened by their ostensible powerlessness in the culture as a consequence of race, class, and gender or sexual identity. At this crucial moment, it is the African who silently accompanies Jesus to Golgotha and the women who silently stand at his feet. The societal "least" are his closest contemplative companions.<sup>3</sup>

That anyone, no matter who they are, can accompany Jesus on this journey. Even a relative nobody like Simon of Cyrene. Simon provides a valuable lesson for us, a valuable model. During Holy Week, we are not called to just stand by and witness the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as they unfold before us. And then return to our everyday lives as if nothing has happened. We are not called to just be idle observers. Simon was pressed into service against his will. No choice in the matter, as Roman soldiers forced him to take up Jesus' cross. Some would say, as I did at the beginning of my reflection, that Simon was in the wrong place at the wrong time. But his experience—at least as Barbara Holmes interprets it—is profoundly significant. Rather than a misfortune, a burden, this was for Simon an opportunity. An opportunity to be “as a servant as he shares the burden with the suffering servant.” An opportunity that undoubtedly changed his life. In this, he was in the right place at the right time.

No one is standing along the side of the road pressing us into service to our Lord as he passes by, making his way to Golgotha. Unlike Simon, we have a choice. We can just stand there, being idle observers, letting it happen, and then go on our merry way. Or we can recognize that we are in the right place at the right time. We can offer ourselves as Jesus' servant. To become his disciples in the deepest, most significant way: as a servant who willingly shares the burden with Christ, the suffering servant. And, like Simon, be forever transformed by the experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 108-9.