Sermon for Lent at Beautiful Saviour (March 29) and Ascension (April 5)

 Luke 23:26-31 **Fix your Eyes on Jesus: Carrying his Cross along the Via Dolorosa**

*A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, Our guilt and evil bearing… Bears shame and stripes and wounds and death, Anguish and mockery and says, “Willing all this I suffer.”*

Today we are going to take a walk with Jesus down the Via Dolorosa in the old city of Jerusalem. Via Dolorosa can be translated *the way of* sorrow or simply *the painful path.* Tonight’s walk is different from other walks you might take. It is a spiritual walk to see what Jesus has done for us.

Where has Jesus led us so far this Lenten Season? We have walked with Jesus to the Garden of Gethsemane to see his agonized prayer answered by the angel sent to strengthen him. After his arrest we followed to the High Priest’s palace. There we were shocked by Peter’s shameful denial of his Lord and shocked even more as the Sanhedrin imposed the death penalty on our Friend and Lord. We stood at a distance as Jesus was tortured and then condemned to crucifixion by Pontius Pilate, the one man in all these events who clearly knew and publicly testified that Jesus was innocent. Today we continue to FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS as he is **CARRYING HIS CROSS ALONG THE VIA DOLOROSA** on his way to Golgotha hill**.**

Jesus has been condemned and now, weakened by the blood lost due to the beatings and the crown of thorns, exhausted by the lack of sleep, he must carry his own cross the half mile or so from Pilate’s judgment hall to the Place of the Skull, Golgotha, the execution hill just outside the city walls. He struggles; he stumbles; he falls. In spite of the prodding of the soldiers, he simply can go on no longer.

A pilgrim from northern Africa, come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, was on his way into the city -- perhaps just arriving at the end of several days’ travel. He is grabbed by the soldiers. He’s forced to carry Jesus’ cross, walking behind the stumbling, staggering Jesus. The man’s name is Simon; he comes from Cyrene in modern-day Libya.

Simon had no desire to do this service to the Lord Jesus. He probably was resentful, angry, that he was forced to dirty his clothes and to face public disgrace. This was much more than an inconvenience. It was a shameful, a humiliating thing he was being forced to do.

As is so often the case in life, God used this unplanned and unwanted event to change Simon’s life. Mark identifies Simon for his readers as the father of Rufus and Alexander. Rufus and Alexander are obviously men known to the believers in the time after Easter. It seems safe to conclude that Simon’s being forced to carry the cross led him – or at least his sons – to come to know Jesus and believe in him. It seems safe to conclude that this unplanned and unwanted event was God’s way to calling Simon and his family to saving faith.

Certainly we can relate to that. Think back over your life. We all have experienced things which at the time seemed all wrong, yet looking back we see how God was using them for our good. We all can testify by experience I’m sure that the Bible promise is true, the promise that *In all things God works for the good of those who love him* (Rom 8:28). And if there’s something you have experienced for which you haven’t yet seen the good, your faith assures you that God has his good reason whether you understand it or not.

As Jesus walks along the Via Dolorosa, crowds line the road, watching the spectacle. Some women seem sincerely moved by the tragic scene. They weep and wail. Jesus turns to them and says something that seems quite harsh and out-of-character for the one we know as our loving Savior, the one we love because he speaks comforting words at times of sorry, words like: *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me…. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you…. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid* (John 14:1, 27).

Instead of the comforting words we would have expected to flow from Jesus’ lips, we hear Jesus say: *“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.* ***29****For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’****30****Then “‘they will say to the mountains, “Fall on us!” and to the hills, “Cover us!”’* ***31****For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?”* (28-31). Jesus is looking ahead to the destruction of Jerusalem and all the suffering to come to the people at that time. And at the same time the destruction of Jerusalem is a warning of the final destruction of this world at the end of time. If the holy, innocent Christ is treated in this way, imagine was harsh treatment will come on those who are guilty.

You might ask: Why did Jesus speak so harshly to these women who were grieving over the cruel treatment he was receiving? The answer lies in looking closely at Luke’s words. You’ll notice that he does not mention any names for the women mourners. We can conclude therefore that these women were just faces in the crowd, not to be identified with those women who were followers and believers in Jesus. We can conclude that the women weeping and wailing were being carried along by the emotion of this tragic, pathetic scene – without realizing its meaning. Jesus did not need their – or our – sympathy. He is willingly going to the cross, willingly carrying out his rescue-mission by enduring the punishment our sins deserve.

The lesson for us to carry away from this walk with Jesus’ along the Via Dolorosa is that sin is serious. And God is serious – deadly serious – when he says that sin must be punished. Our sins deserve the death sentence because, as the Scripture says: *The wages of sin is death.* As we see Jesus carrying his cross on the Via Dolorosa, we see what our sins deserved – and, instead of weeping, we praise God that Jesus has endured the punishment, so we don’t have to.

A question for us to ask today is: Where were Jesus’ disciples and the believing women as Jesus’ stumbled under the weight of his cross on the Via Dolorosa? Why didn’t one of the disciples step forward and offer to carry the cross? Why didn’t Mary Magdalene or one of the other women shout out words of explanation to the crowd, telling why Jesus was carrying that cross?

 I’m sure we know the answer -- because we’ve been there! We’ve been in situations where we were given a clear opportunity to confess Christ and what his Word, the Bible, says, yet we’ve stayed quiet.

 I remember an incident when I was in ninth grade in public school. Our biology class had been discussing human origins, and the teacher confessed to the class that he believed the Bible’s record of creation. Later at the lunch table my classmates were discussing the class. All seemed to be making fun of the teacher for believing in creation. Then they turned to me and asked: “What about you? Do you believe like he does?” I remember to my shame my answer: “I don’t know,” I said. But I knew. There was no doubt in my mind that I believed the Bible, but it was hard to say that publicly when the crowd seemed to be leaning the other way. I also remember vividly what happened next. We had a class bully. He was a big redheaded kid with lots of freckles. Nobody crossed Alex Crawford. No sooner were the words “I don’t know” out of my mouth, when Alex spoke up. “I believe in creation,” he said. All of a sudden, the subject was dropped. And I bet if a poll were taken right then, everyone on the table would have said they believed the Bible’s record. By the way, this illustrates how God can use our efforts in ways far beyond our wildest imaginations. Fifty-five years later the testimony of Mr. McPherson, the biology teacher, and Alex, the bully, are still being heard in my head – and now they’ve been heard in this service. Only God knows what amazing things he intends to accomplish through you and your testimony? Only God knows how long he will cause your testimony to be remembered and to ring in someone’s ears.

Pilgrims still walk along the Via Dolorosa – some carrying crosses. They stop and pray at the designated spot where Jesus stumbled and Simon was forced to help. They stop and pray at the designated spot where Jesus spoke to the weeping women. These places today are not the real ones of Jesus’ walk. Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt several times since Jesus’ day. No one knows the exact spots, but certainly the stops on the present-day pilgrim’s route are in the right vicinity. As the pilgrims wind their way through the streets, they know that their path is leading to Golgotha and Joseph’s tomb. The Via Dolorosa stops in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, but the pilgrims know that the journey doesn’t really end there. The true trail continues on from Easter’s empty tomb -- on to the Ascension Mount and Jesus’ return to the glory of Heaven.

As we worship tonight we also know that Lent ends with the victory of Easter. And we also know what lies along the trail of our lives and what lies at the end of that trail. As each day begins, we know that temptations to sin in thought, word and action will come our way, and we know that each day we will fall and sin. But we also know that there is forgiveness for all our sin because Jesus paid our debt and bore our punishment. As each day begins, we know that we are one day closer to the day of our death. But we also know that Jesus will raise us from our graves and, when we stand before God on Judgment Day, we will judged “righteous” because Jesus’ righteousness is credited to us. As each day begins, we know that Satan will attempt to divert us from serving our God. But we also know that the Holy Spirit in us will help us fight Satan’s temptations and help us live more and more as the children of God, for that is who we are. We FIX OUR EYES ON JESUS and know that he **CARRIED HIS CROSS ALONG THE VIA DOLOROSA** in order to save us.

*From morn till eve, in all I do, I’ll praise you, Christ, my treasure.*

*To sacrifice myself for you Shall be my aim and pleasure.*