

PALM SUNDAY B

Mark 15:1-39, (40-47)

JESUS STUMBLED

This is a tough Sunday to come to church.

Not because of the good weather.

And, not because there is the strong temptation
to let spring fever rule the day.

It's a tough Sunday to come to church because

it begins in triumph and ends in tragedy.

It starts with a big celebration and closes with a catastrophe.

We come in joyful, we go out mournful. If there ever is a day
when the ambiguities of our faith are vividly evident,
certainly, it is today, Palm Sunday.

This is the day we celebrate the entrance of our Lord Jesus

into the holy city Jerusalem. That's what the processional
was all about at the beginning of the worship service.

The people lined the streets. They laid their coats like a carpet

at His feet. They waved branches of palm in His honor.

And, they shouted, "**Hosanna!**

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

There is no better name for it:

It was a triumphal entry into the depths of the city.

But, how soon things changed!

They should have figured it out

when they saw Him riding in on a donkey.

That's not the way a conquering, victorious hero would do it.

Something was different about this man Jesus.

From our perspective, these two thousand twenty-four years later,

we can see it clearly. But, not them! Not then!

The events tumble out of the gospels like children

at the sound of an afternoon school bell.

Jesus rode in on a donkey. He cleared out the Temple courts.

He taught with great authority.

He ate His last supper with His disciples.

He went to pray in the garden. He was betrayed.

He was denied. He was tried and sentenced to die.

He was stripped, mocked, ridiculed, and beaten without mercy.

The instrument of His death was placed upon His shoulders
and He was forced to carry it to the outskirts of the city.

And then, great nails were driven into His wrists and ankles,
and He was hung upon a wooden cross to die.

How could they have known? How could they have understood?

The shouts of their hosannas would linger in the air almost until
the sound of the hammer rang down upon the nails.

It's a tough Sunday to be in church – having to deal with all of this.

Brightness to darkness. Joy to anguish. Victory to defeat.

Celebration to crucifixion. In such a short span of time,
it's enough to give you the bends.

So, rather than sprint from Palm Sunday to Easter –

let's slow down a little, take a little time
to look at the events along the way.

Easter is much better

if you don't have to catch your breath once you get there.

There's one thing, that I want you to see this morning.

I have a hunch that you've passed it by rather quickly before.

Perhaps, you've totally missed it in the rush.

And I can't blame you. It's just a brief incident that took place

as Jesus made His way through the crowd,

dragging His cross to Golgotha hill.

It's found in the 15th chapter of the gospel of Mark:

"Then they led him out to crucify him.

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon,

the father of Alexander and Rufus,

was passing by on his way in from the country,

and they forced him to carry the cross.

They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha

(which means The Place of the Skull). Then they offered him

wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

And they crucified him."

Would you look at that? In the crowd. It's Jesus.

And, He's not a pretty sight.

There's blood streaming down His face and back.

His eyes are half open. His legs are slow and heavy.

His body is hunched over a rough piece of timber

and He's dragging it down the street,

moving with an awkward, shuffling motion.

There's no way to carry it on His shoulders.

His back has been ripped open from the blows of a scourging whip.

The soldiers are impatient. He falters. He stumbles.

One soldier curses at Him.

Another grabs a man from the crowd and points to the crossbeam.

"You carry it. Pick it up and come with us," he says.

Over the years, much has been said about this innocent bystander,

this man in the crowd who was given his fifteen minutes of fame.

Mark tells us his name was Simon and that he hailed

from a place called Cyrene. Interestingly enough,

it's an area in North Africa that we call Libya today.

Some have speculated that Simon was a black man,

but we really don't know for sure. The only other detail that we're given is that he had two sons: Alexander and Rufus. We don't know why he was heading into Jerusalem that day. We don't even know if he was there as a part of the Passover celebration, or simply there on business. We can only guess.

Simon of Cyrene could have passed through that crowd unnoticed. But, he was at the wrong place, at the wrong time. He was on his way into the city. Jesus was on His way out. And, as a result, he was singled out and forced to carry the cross of Jesus.

Simon didn't volunteer. The word that Mark uses here is "**forced.**" In the Greek, it was a word adopted from a Persian word that described the compulsory employment of beasts for the delivery of mail in the Persian Empire. Simon had no say in the matter whatsoever. He was grabbed and compelled to carry the cross.

If we hurry by, trying to get this whole gruesome thing over with,
we'll miss something here – something important.

There's a reason that Simon was jerked out of the crowd
and pressed into service that day.

Jesus stumbled. The weight of the timber was too much for Him.

He had been terribly weakened by the scourging
the Roman soldiers had given Him.

It was more than he could bear.

Simon helped because Jesus stumbled.

I don't know about you, but that's one of

the most offensive pictures of Jesus I can imagine. Stumbling.

But, there He is. Jesus stumbled and fell,
and Simon had to help Him.

Back when Michael Jordan decided that baseball

could do without him, and he was going back to play basketball –

a network newsman asked a little boy

why he liked Michael Jordan so much.

Do you know what he said? He said,

"Because he can jump over everything!"

That's what we want, isn't it?

That's the least we can ask of our heroes. Don't stumble.

Don't fall. Jump over everything! When I was a child,

one of my favorite heroes was Superman.

I loved it when his show came on TV.

Do you old folks remember how it started?

"Faster than a speeding bullet.

More powerful than a locomotive.

Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.

'Look, up in the sky! Is it a bird? Is it a plane?'

No, it's Superman! Strange visitor from another planet,

who came to earth with powers and abilities

far beyond those of mortal men. Superman.

Who can change the course of mighty rivers,

bend steel in his bare hands.

And who, disguised as Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter

for a great metropolitan newspaper,

fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice,

and the American way!"

Now, that's the kind of hero you can really get excited about!

A lot of my friends had red capes,
and t-shirts with a big yellow **"S"** on the chest.

But, Jesus stumbled. And, Simon had to help Him.

If you and I had been there that day,
we wouldn't have seen a superhero,
strutting around, jumping over everything,
blowing away problems with his breath.

We would have seen a weak, wobbly man who was having trouble
just putting one foot in front of the other,
who could barely catch his breath.

We would have seen Him falter, and fall,
and struggle to get to His feet –
a soldier cursing Him and lashing at Him with a whip.

Jesus stumbled. It sounds incredible,
it looks unbelievable, doesn't it?

Have you ever known somebody who stumbled? I have.

I know lots of people who stagger

under the burdens they have to carry.

Good people, struggling just to make it.

Some days they do, some days they don't.

Some days are so unbearable, it's all they can do

just to get out of bed. They struggle under the weight.

They falter. They fumble. They fall.

I know a young family in another town.

The wife and mother has cancer.

Three grade school children.

Trip after trip to Dallas. Chemotherapy. Radiation.

Experimental drugs and procedures. Expensive operations.

Twice they've thought they got it all in an operation.

It's back.

Oh, they keep a stiff upper lip. They hope beyond hope.

They pray. They cry. They endure. They trust God.

They carry on. But, some days it's just too hard.

Some days the pain is just too severe. They stumble.

Jesus stumbled. Have you ever stumbled?

I have an old friend, a pastor. We've known each other for years.

We used to serve churches in the same town.

Not long ago, he called, just to say, "**Hi**" –

and to tell me he was no longer in the ministry.

The details aren't important. He got fed up. He got mixed up.

He got messed up. Couldn't bear the load.

So, he did something stupid and had to quit.

I guess you could say, "**He stumbled.**"

Jesus stumbled. Have you ever stumbled?

Sure you have. We all stumble at times.

We all stagger under the loads we have to carry.

All of us have been knocked down in defeat and despair.

Years ago, back in the days when I was fresh out of seminary

and filled beyond my capacity with fresh knowledge,

a young man came to me with a horrible burden.

He was newly married and he was deeply in love with his wife.

By all accounts and appearances,

their marriage was happy and fulfilling.

However, a few years before they met

he had done something unthinkable,

something on the far side of being legal.

And it bothered him deeply. He had fallen, he had failed,

and it was almost more than he could stand.

What would you say to someone like that? What would you tell him?

Do you know what I did? I talked about restitution.

I talked about God's forgiveness. I talked about honesty,

about owning up to your mistakes, about things like that.

What would you have told him?

I want to show you something.

Something that's nestled away

in the New Testament book of Hebrews.

Something that's powerful, beyond our wildest imagination.

It's found in Hebrews 4:15-16.

It says, "***For we do not have a high priest***

who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,

***but we have one who in every respect has been tested
as we are, yet without sin.***

***Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need."***

Jesus became like us in every way.

Because we stumble,

He learned what it was like to stumble. Because we struggle,
and our burdens are often too heavy for us to carry on our own,
he struggled and learned what it was like to carry a burden
that would drive you to your knees.

He can sympathize with our weaknesses,
because He knows what it is to be weak.

So, there He is, a horrible sight.

Struggling, falling again and again under the weight of His burden.

But this is not bad news. This is good news. Jesus stumbled!

"Jesus stumbled." I could have said ... I should have said ...

I wish I'd told my parishioner that! Amen.