

*The Not-So-Random Man*

*Mark 15:16-21*

*Bellevue Baptist Church*

*Easter Sunday, 2026*

If you brought your Bible, please open with me to Mark 15.

Have you ever used the expression: that is so random? Life is filled with random encounters—isn't it?

One time, Lynley and I were at an airport, standing in line, waiting to board the plane. I glanced over my shoulder and noticed behind me—there he was—Christian music legend Steven Curtis Chapman.

I've always taken a small amount of pride in telling people that Steven and I attended the same small college up in Indiana—and since we have those common roots, I leaned over to Lynley and said: "You know, I've got to say something."

She said, "No, you don't."

I said, "I most certainly do. I will abandon it all for the sake of this call."

We walked onto the plane. I strategically selected seats across the aisle from Steven Curtis. Passengers were filing by, so I waited for a break in the action, then seized my opportunity. I walked over and said a few words to this man whose music has shaped my early Christian life. He was kind, he smiled, and I returned to my seat, my heart racing.

It was such a special moment, for me and I'm sure, for him. To prove this serendipitous moment had happened, I took the opportunity to snap a picture. Incognito, I raised up my phone and captured this framer:

(Show funny image of the side of Steven Curtis Chapman's head)

Now with the side of his head, I could prove to all my friends—that me and a SCC spent some quality time together in the air. And yes, it's true—we attended the same small college up in Indiana. A random moment I will never forget!

Life can feel so random—the way our lives mysteriously meet the lives of others.

Such was the case with Simon of Cyrene, a man traveling—a guy on his way to something else, when he looked up, and there was a person far more important than any Christian artist.

Simon saw Jesus. Now, let's see what else happened on that Good Friday. Mark 15:16+

**<sup>16</sup> The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the governor's residence) and called the whole company together. <sup>17</sup> They dressed him in a purple robe, twisted together a crown of thorns, and put it on him. <sup>18</sup> And they began to salute him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" <sup>19</sup> They were hitting him on the head with a stick and spitting on him. Getting down on their knees, they were paying him homage. <sup>20</sup> After they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple robe and put his clothes on him.**

### **They led him out to crucify him. Mark 15:16-20**

This scene I just read, happened just before Simon meets Jesus. Mark 15 is the start of the darkest day in history. Of Jesus, it is said, He was:

Tried by sinful men,  
Torn and beaten, then  
This the pow'r of the cross:

Jesus Christ was tried by sinful men. Pilate had already said to people: "I see no reason for his death! I have examined this man and I have found no offense."

But the mob was insistent: Crucify him!

And when Pilate could not calm them, he caved. And said: so shall it be.

He was tried by sinful men,  
Torn and beaten, then.

The Roman soldiers would then dress him as a kind of play-king. They chuckled as they spread a purple robe over his shoulders. One man, with a thick stick, popped him on the back of the head and said, Prophecy Messiah—who hit you just then?

In jest, they pretended to be this king's loyal subjects. They forced down a crown of jagged thorns, causing his teeth to clench. Soon they would see the power of his cross, as they led him to his place of death.

And, on that road to Calvary, V.21 says...

**<sup>21</sup> They forced a man coming in from the country, who was passing by, to carry Jesus's cross. He was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.**

Notice a key phrase in the text: he was a man "*who was passing by.*" Simon wasn't searching for a Savior that day. He had no plans to witness a criminal's death. He did not put on old clothes that could be ruined by the stains of blood.

Mark says he was coming in from the country. Random to us, but right on time, to God.

That day would be the fork in his road, a moment never forgotten. His life was changed by an encounter with Jesus.

I want to raise three simple questions as we consider Simon's place in the Easter story:

*Who was he before he met Jesus?*

*What happened on the day they met?*

*What came of him after?*

Let's start with the first:

Who was Simon of Cyrene before he met Jesus?

We only know a few things. He came from North Africa—from a city called Cyrene. That matters, because it tells us Simon had traveled a long way to be in Jerusalem. He wasn't a local. He was a pilgrim. Like many of the Jews his family had been scattered across the world. They called it the 'Dispersion'—the Diaspora. Whole families forced out of their homeland, yet still holding onto their faith, showing up in Jerusalem whenever they could, so that they would not forget where they came from.

Simon was one of those, a religious traveler. He had come to celebrate The Passover. If you're new to the Bible, the Passover comes from the ancient book of Exodus, the second book in the Bible.

There we find the story of the Jewish people enslaved in Egypt. The brutal Pharaoh cracked his whip and made them work till their hands were blistered. The Jews cried out to God and He sent them Moses, a fugitive. But Pharaoh scoffed at this man's request to release the Hebrew slaves.

So God sent plagues, ten of them. The tenth being the worst of all. On a single night, God would claim the firstborn son of every household, except for those doorposts brushed with blood. When a lamb had been slain, its life lifeblood painted on the threshold, salvation occurred.

That night, God Passed Over all those Jewish houses when he brought judgment, and thus began the annual remembrance of the Passover.

This is why Simon had come, all that way, from Africa. So we know he was a tourist, and a God-fearing man. . We also know he was a dad. In v.21...

**They forced a man coming in from the country, who was passing by, to carry Jesus's cross. He was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.**

Mark adds the two names of his sons to the story. Why the specifics?

Since it's believed that Mark wrote this Gospel down 30 years later, it seems that Alexander and Rufus were grown men. Mark was saying to the skeptics: if you don't believe what I'm writing—then go ask Alexander or Rufus. They'll tell you what happened to their dad on that fateful day. He adds historical reliability for his first century readers, because Christianity is rooted in the facts of history.

Years later, the apostle Paul writes these words to the church:

***“Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord...” Romans 16:13***

Could this be the same Rufus? Could this be the boy who grew up in Cyrene? A son who watched his father leave home one day, returning as one changed by the power of the cross?

Scripture doesn't give us certainty but it's a beautiful possibility.

And it's consistent with how the Gospel works. God often gets a hold of one member of the family, and before long, the Good News spreads to a household.

When Lynley and I were church planters in Denver, we saw our son quickly make friends with other boys on the street. One day, our boy and the neighbor boy were jumping on our trampoline. I was on the back porch; I could hear the whole thing. The neighbor boy says, “you want to hang out tomorrow?” My son says, “Can't...it's Sunday. We've got church.”

The neighbor boy says, “What's church?” He had no idea what that word even meant..

Fast forward a few months, the neighbor boy is bored so he comes to our Vacation Bible School. He experiences church and hears about Jesus. He's fascinated. He goes home and asks his father, “Dad, how come you never told me about Jesus?”

Fast forward again, the next day, his dad sees me getting my mail. He sprints over and says, “Mandrell, my kid has been going to your church thing. He's asking me all about Jesus!? What do you want me to tell him??”

When the Gospel gets a hold of one person, it often spreads to a household.

Who was Simon before meeting Jesus? I've told you all that we know. A God-fearing man. A dispersed Jew. A father of two boys.

Now, let's move onto the second question:

*What happened to Simon on the day he Jesus?*

The Word says: "They led him out to crucify him."

We'll have to fly into Jerusalem for this and let you get a feel for the terrain. In Matthew 16:21, Jesus changes his tone of voice and tells his disciples that he must now make his way to Jerusalem, the Holy City, where He will suffer and die. It was in the streets of this city, that the world would witness his humiliation. Within the town, there was a path that ran from the governor's palace to the place we call Calvary. That road today is called *the Via Dolorosa*, which means "*the Way of Sorrow*."

The route Jesus walked ran right through the heart of the city. This was not a back alley. This was not a short cut. This was not a quiet road. The Roman rulers wanted maximum visibility for those who had defied their laws. Crucifixion was a form of terrorism, intended to frighten the people into submission. And it was public by design. Boys and girls grew up knowing—if we cross the Romans, we will find ourselves fixed to one.

Even today, pilgrims from all over the world descend upon the Holy Land, and they walk this way of sorrow. They long to feel what those first-century felt. Like loved ones who visit the gravesite of their father, to feel that closeness, that proximity, people go to this place, to retrace the steps of Christ. The path is .37 miles, a short distance, but just like in Jesus' day, the walk takes an hour or more to pass through the congested city.

With time, Christians have designated 14 stops along the path, places where people can park for a moment, and ponder what happened there. One of those sites is the intersection of Simon of Cyrene and Jesus of Nazareth.

And this is the place where this random man named Simon, showed up, perhaps wearing the clothes he left home with. He was a Jew, ethnically, but he was probably dressed like a man from Cyrene.

Pilgrims like to stop here and imagine what Simon the tourist saw. There he was, lying in the street. A tortured criminal, coasting on fumes. The weight of the wooden beam had overwhelmed him. He could go no further. His human body had given out.

So the soldiers scanned the crowd, searching for a grown man available. And there he was, a tourist, selected and told to heave those wooden beams upon his shoulders. To ruin his clothes with the stranger's blood.

Imagine that moment. The intimidation of being told, "You. Get under that cross and carry it the rest of the way. The book of Proverbs says, "In his heart, a man plans his

course, but the Lord determines his steps.” I have a feeling this became Simon’s life verse.

God had guided his steps, and now, he would be sealed forever inside the Easter story, a station on the Way of Sorrow.

As the centuries passed, the Catholic Church recognized that most believers would never make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, see what Simon saw, and perhaps feel what Simon felt. They wouldn’t be able to walk the actual Way of Sorrow. Artists were activated and challenged to bring the Stations of the Cross into hallways surrounding the sanctuaries, as a teaching tool of the greatest day in history. Sometimes the art was stained glass, other times put in paintings. But the worshipers could now move from station to station, rehearsing the story again, remembering that Christianity is rooted in history.

Simon can be found at Station Five. A key figure in the story.

And what are we supposed to learn, when we stop at Station? What are we supposed to teach our kids? Mark Blair said it best:

“Sometimes we are called to carry things we don’t want to carry. We are forced to walk through things we don’t want to walk through.”

Jesus said, If any man wants to follow me, he must deny himself, he must take up his cross and follow me.

Now getting back to the story, I moved quickly past a critical question. Why was Jesus down on the ground when Simon first saw him? Why did he have to be helped?

It certainly had something to do with this, the *scourge*, an ancient torture device that came in various shapes and sizes. A scourge was whip with multiple leather strands. Embedded at the ends were sharp pieces of bone, stone, and metal. Every lash of one of these would have taken a few bars of life, from Jesus. This is why Simon found him on all fours.

I have one right here. A replica built for this moment. Think of the fear this must have caused when dangled in front of the prisoner. The purpose of flogging was twofold. First, to break the will of the prisoner—after feeling these fragments embedded in his back, the prisoner would have no fuel left once he arrived at the site. He would not struggle while they held his wrists to the wood. Second, the flogging would cause the prisoner to die before sundown. Rome preferred efficiency. A flogged man dies faster.

The Jews had a rule: only 39-lashes allowed, but the Romans were unlimited.

With this hideous device, they struck the back of Jesus, and then they turned him and struck his ribs. Then his chest, like a ruthless rotisserie. Isaiah 53 was fulfilled: He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our sins. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him. By his stripes we are healed.

This is why Jesus Christ collapsed on the road to Calvary. He was tried by sinful men, torn and beaten then. And when Simon knelt down, when he made eye contact with the Savior, he saw the relentless love of God toward sinners, of which he was one. When a person meets Jesus, he changes the rest of their life.

O to see the dawn  
Of the darkest day  
Christ on the road to Calvary

And once Simon had helped him there, what happened then? You ask. And now we reach the 3rd and final question: *What happened to Simon after he met Jesus?* Did he stick around till 3? Did he become an evangelist in Africa?

We don't know the answer to this question. We will know one day in heaven.

The book of Acts says of David that he “*served God's purpose in his own generation, and then he fell asleep.*” David did what God put him on the planet to do. And we get the feeling that the same could be said of Simon—he served God's purpose that day. He had been chosen before the foundation of the world to help Christ to the cross.

Maybe you're here today, and you wonder if God has a purpose for you? Maybe you're a person who doubts whether Christianity can even be true, given the amount of violence we see in the world today. You might ask:

**A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:  
How can you believe that God is in control when so many random evils happen?**

This is one of the most common objections to Christianity. I'd like to take just a moment and chase this down, since it seems likely that some who visit at Easter are unconvinced. Jesus actually answers this question.

In Luke 13, Jesus is asked about a random tragedy that had just taken place—a tower suddenly fell in a town called Siloam, and 18 people perished. When asked about it, he said:

***“Do you think those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them were worse sinners than all the others?”***

Here, he corrects the false assumption, that those who experienced tragedy were had greater sin than the rest. Jesus says their suffering was not because of guilt, but because we live in a world warped by evil.

If you've ever tried to dribble a basketball, one that isn't perfectly round, you know what happens. A warped ball doesn't bounce reliably. It kicks sideways. It's way is unpredictable. So is the world.

Because sin entered the world through our ancestors, our human bodies are now susceptible to disease, our human governments are now prone to corruption, our human marriages can turn to a battle of the sexes. We are doing the best we can down here, but we live in a broken world.

That's why the world is such a scary place at times—because on any given day, disaster can strike any one of us.

This why Jesus asks: Do you think those 18 people were worse sinners than you?

***I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.***

The real danger is not sudden death, but a heart that is not ready to meet God. Each man's life is but a breath. We are here for a moment, and then we are gone. It's for the next life that we now live.

A skeptic sees a tragedy and says: See, God is absent. He must be rejected. But Jesus saw a tragedy and said: See, the world is broken, you must be redeemed.

The Apostle Paul said:

**If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone. But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 1 Cor. 15:19-20**

This is the great hope of Easter, that Jesus died, but didn't stay dead. When all is said and done, the dead are brought to life. I want us to finish by feeling that truth deep down in our hearts.

*Enter Josh and musicians...*

As I bring this message to a close, I felt led to do something I've never done before. I want to bring home the power of the cross through the rich lyrics of a song. Many of you know that my predecessor, Bro. Steve would always sing a solo on Easter. Don't get any ideas. That's not about to happen. Rather than you hear me sing, I want to hear you

sing. I want to turn you all into a choir. I want you to show your love for Christ today by giving him your voice.

Maybe you don't like to sing. Maybe you are one who says, "I let the other people sing." If that's you, be aware that Bible contains more than 500 references to singing—50 of those are direct commands to sing. If you refuse to sing in this choir, I'll let you take it up with him. :)

As you to stand to your feet let me tell you about the song...

The song that you are about to sing—it's like a play, with four separate acts. Each scene describes the day Jesus Christ died. In the first stanza, we remember the mockery, The pain endured, before his body was fixed to wood.

Sing these words:

**O, to see the dawn  
Of the darkest day;  
Christ on the road to Calvary.  
Tried by sinful men,  
Torn and beaten, then  
Nailed to a cross of wood.**

*Behold the Lamb...*

**This the pow'r of the cross:  
Christ became sin for us.  
Took the blame, bore the wrath;  
We stand forgiven at the cross.**

Now, with his beaten body on full display, gravity was pulling him down, but the Bible says that he bore more than his body weight. In that moment he bore the weight of all our sins. He took the pain for us.

Sing it:

**O, to see the pain  
Written on Your face,  
Bearing the awesome weight of sin.  
Ev'ry bitter thought,**

**Ev'ry evil deed  
Crowning Your blood-stained brow.  
This the pow'r of the cross:  
Christ became sin for us.  
Took the blame, bore the wrath;  
We stand forgiven at the cross.**

For six hours he hung there, till his breathing slowed and his side pierced by a sharp pole. Upon his death, a series of miracles suddenly happen. A darkness in the sky, an earthquake rattles the ground, the curtain of the temple torn down the center. His suffering finally ends...Sing..

**Now the daylight flees;  
Now the ground beneath  
Quakes as its Maker bows His head.**

Band gets bigger

**Curtain torn in two,  
Dead are raised to life—  
“Finished” the victory cry.**

(It is finished, He paid it all!)

**This the pow'r of the cross:  
Christ became sin for us.  
Took the blame, bore the wrath;  
We stand forgiven at the cross.**

Are you ready? It's the best part. On Easter, he breaks free from the jail of death. Showing us we can too. By his wounds we've been set free. He knows your name, he died for you. Sing it...

**O, to see my name  
Written in the wounds  
For through Your suff'ring  
I am free.  
Death is crushed to death,  
Life is mine to live,  
Won through Your**

**selfless love!**

**This the pow'r of the cross:**

(Son of God slain for us!)

**Son of God slain for us**

**What a love, what a cost!**

**We stand forgiven at the cross.**

**This the pow'r of the cross:**

**Son of God slain for us.**

**What a love, what a cost!**

**We stand forgiven at the cross.**

Now, I just have to think, that someone here has a hunger to stand forgiven at the cross.

The Gospel is the power of God for the salvation for all those who believe, and there must be someone in this room who was supposed to meet him today. You thought this was a random invitation to church, but what you see as random, God sees it as right on time.

If you can feel the Holy Spirit moving in your heart, the Bible says your response should be urgent: today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart. I'll lead you through a simple prayer, which is going to involve just two things:

First, repent of your sins. Just admit to God that you've done so many things wrong. He is merciful and compassionate toward sinners. He stands ready to forgive all who repent.

Second, you must be willing to take up your cross and follow him. He's in charge now. By faith, you put your life in his hands. Scripture says that all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved. Come to him, just as you are.