

Simon the Cyrenian, the women from Jerusalem, and the good thief all encounter Jesus on the original stations of the cross.

Simon came from Cyrene, the capital city of a district in North Africa in modern day Libya. Mark's gospel says Simon had two sons named Alexander and Rufus. He might have been a Jew who had come to Jerusalem for passover. He was probably not a disciple, or if so not a very good one, because Luke says the soldiers "made Simon carry the cross behind Jesus." Simon doesn't appear in John's gospel at all. In fact, as we'll hear on Good Friday, John says Jesus carried the cross by himself. Because Luke says Simon carried the cross "behind Jesus," some artists tried to reconcile the accounts by having Jesus carry the front of the cross and Simon pick up the rear. At the time criminals customarily carried the crossbeam themselves. The vertical beam would already have been in place at Calvary. It would not have been normal for anyone to carry the crossbeam except Jesus. We can only surmise that he was so physically weakened by his ordeal to this point, that he was unable to carry the cross any further, so they had to force someone else to help. Simon did the right thing, but only because they made him do it. Very likely he became a disciple later, and bore witness to the crucifixion of Jesus. That would explain why he and his sons had their names inscribed in the gospels.

The women of Jerusalem wept for Jesus, but they also seem not to be disciples. Later on, after Jesus dies, Luke tells about the women from Galilee who had followed Jesus -- probably a different group. The women of Jerusalem sympathize with Jesus, so they step closer to discipleship than Simon did, but their tears do not preserve them from Jesus' words of woe. They represent a city that has turned on the prophets who spoke God's word. On his way up Calvary, Jesus predicted that bad things would happen to Jerusalem, and unconceived children were better off than those who would be born. In fact, Jerusalem was taken by Roman soldiers in a destructive battle forty years after Jesus died. Unaware of this future, the women weep for him, but they do not represent faithful disciples.

In those original stations of the cross, Jesus meets only one person who becomes a true disciple, the good thief. The thief acknowledges his sin, admits he is paying for his crime, and proclaims the holiness of Jesus to the other crucified criminal. He says, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom," and Jesus replies, "today you will be with me in Paradise."

Disciples are not always what they appear to be. Some do the work of Christ, like Simon, but their heart is not in it. Others have plenty of heart, like the women of Jerusalem, but their deeds do not match their words. But if you have faith, like the good thief, proclaim it, and confess your sins, you can be a good disciple, even if you have committed a crime so great that society says you deserve death. As we enter this holy week, let us put words and deeds together, confess our sins, and believe in our hearts that Jesus Christ is Lord.