

You ever stop to think about just how easy our lives have become? Some of you who are older than I am know better than I do. I mean, there were things years ago that took time and effort and sweat...things that you can do now in seconds, or with the click of a button.

Like getting directions. I remember the days when you had to keep an atlas in your car to get around. Pull it out of the trunk, find the right quadrant; turn to the right page, plot your course, write down all the turns and exit numbers...and today? You say, “Siri, take me home.” And she says, “Getting directions to home.” And she’ll even reroute you if you’re heading into traffic.

Or shopping. It used to mean stopping at different stores to pick up all the right items, comparing prices and cutting coupons along the way. Now, you can get just about anything delivered to your home with the click of a mouse.

We could go on. But I don’t think this should surprise us – that every year, we’re finding easier ways to do things. After all, this is human nature, isn’t it? We prefer the comfortable and convenient, the path of least resistance...and given a choice between the hard way and the easy way, we’ll choose the easy way ten times out of ten.

But what about when the hard way is God’s way? Jesus’ words this morning don’t sit well with us. “If anyone comes after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” We might wish there were a way to make following Jesus easier, might wish for a comfortable and convenient variety of Christianity. But when it comes to following Jesus, there is no easy way. There’s only the hard way, that involves struggle and hurt – the way of the cross.

We don’t like to hear it...but we need to. Jesus’ followers then had misguided ideas about Jesus and what it meant to follow him. And should we think we don’t struggle with the same misguided ideas as they did? So listen as Jesus reminds us this morning of this truth: The cross isn’t a “maybe” ...it’s a “must.” 1) For him, and 2) for us.

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. 26 What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?

II. For him

You remember last week's lesson? Jesus asked the disciples that most important lesson in life. "Who am I?" Jesus whole ministry up until that time, his miracles and his message, were focused on teaching the disciples the right answer. And when test time came, Peter hit the nail on the head: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." You are God, made man, here as the promised Savior from sin.

Now there's a shift in Jesus' training. From who he was...to what that meant he had to do. **From that time on...** Jesus' focus was squarely on the cross. **From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**

Did you catch the "musts"? "Must suffer." "Must be killed." There was no way around it. The white hot wrath of a holy God over sin had to be satisfied. For us and for our salvation, the cross was a "must." Which is why it surprises us so much to see what happens next. ²² **Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"** ²³ **Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."**

So, what exactly was Peter thinking? You find the answer in Jesus' words here: "You have in mind the things of men." Earthly things. That's where Peter tripped up. See, the cross wasn't necessary in Peter's mind because he still struggled with what kind of a Savior Jesus would be. He still had this idea that Jesus would be an earthly king with an earthly kingdom. Here's how he pictured it: Jesus keeps performing bigger and better miracles. Larger and larger crowds follow Jesus. Jesus is crowned King. Jesus conquers all enemies and rules forever over a glorious earthly kingdom, free from sickness, demons, and death.

Sounds great, doesn't it? Easy-living for all – paradise on earth. Only...one eternally big problem remains. The problem of sin. No wonder Jesus called Peter Satan. If Jesus took the cross-less path to glory, the world would be lost forever – and that's exactly what Satan wanted.

The things of men or the things of God. Which do we have in mind when we think about Jesus? Do we sometimes make the mistake of Peter and look at Jesus primarily as a source of earthly blessings? Are we more interested in Jesus the earthly problem-solver - the one who can fix my marriage, the one who can solve my financial problems, the one who can help my depression - than in Jesus the Savior from sin? If we're more interested in the Jesus who can make us happy and healthy and wealthy, then we're looking for the wrong kind of Savior. Then we have in mind the things of men, not the things of God. Then we've forgotten that our biggest problems aren't marital, or financial, or psychological. Our biggest problem is sin.

Thank God Jesus never forgot that. Never. "Get behind me, Satan." Such strong words – but they had to be. Do you hear Jesus love for you in them? His dedication, his unshakeable commitment to solving your biggest problem - sin? He knew it meant shame and rejection and agony and death...but he wouldn't budge. He had the temptation to forego it all – and he doesn't even give it a second thought. The cross – that's what he came for. As misguided as his

disciples were, he came to suffer and die for them and their sins. As misguided as we sometimes are, he came to suffer and die for our sins.

So the cross was a “must” for Jesus – but not because God owed us anything. Only because God’s love made it a “must” – he couldn’t stand the thought of being apart from us forever. So when just a year later Jesus entered Jerusalem to do what he promised here, he didn’t drag his feet. He went willingly. Luke tells us he set out “resolutely” for Jerusalem to save us from our sins. And on his cross, that’s what he did.

II. So is ours

Peter telling Jesus what kind of a Savior he should be had everything to do with what kind of a follower Peter wanted to be. Don’t you think, as he urged Jesus to give up the cross, he had himself in mind, too? “Don’t let that kind of suffering happen to you, Jesus, because then it might happen to us, too!” No, Peter wanted an easy life as Jesus’ follower! So Jesus says: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”**

Do you see the beauty of the word “anyone” here? Christ died for all. His blessings he won for all. “Anyone” - it’s almost like Jesus is leaving a blank here, and he wants everyone’s name to fill it, because he wants everyone to be a recipient of his forgiveness, an heir of his eternal life. The best part? At your baptism, the Holy Spirit filled in that blank with your name.

But lest we think with Peter that following Jesus should be an easy existence...well, there’s that little word again – “must.” There’s no way around it. Our cross is a must, too.

But it’s important for us to understand what Jesus means when he talks about our crosses. We sometimes throw that term around lightly – call any suffering we experience a cross, right? But that’s not really true. Only Jesus’ followers carry crosses – unbelievers don’t experience it. The cross is anything we suffer because of our connection to Christ.

That can include our pain and our problems, when they lead us to struggle spiritually and question God’s love or promises. It certainly also includes the times we suffer ridicule at the hands of a sinful world simply for living or sharing our faith.

But there’s more. The heaviest and most painful part of this cross doesn’t come from without – it comes from within. “[They] must deny themselves.” It means saying “NO” to what you want in deference to what Jesus wants. It means doing things Jesus’ way, even though it’s hard and hurts. It means saying “NO” when everything inside of you screams for another drink. Saying “NO” to that part of you that wants to put yourself above others. And this hurts – because it’s really dying, every day. It’s putting to death your sinful nature – not just once a week. But every day, and every moment of every day. You know how painful it is. How tiring it is.

So...why? Does Jesus enjoy watching us suffer? Of course not. You know your Savior better than that. So did the apostles. How did they see their crosses? Paul thanked God for his

weaknesses. Peter and the rest rejoiced when they were beaten for preaching the gospel. Were they crazy?

No. They saw these crosses for what they are: Blessings from a loving Savior. Our crosses are a "must" because Jesus loves us. Yes, they hurt. Yes, they're heavy. But without them, we'd never appreciate Christ and his cross. Every day they drive us back to Christ's cross, so that there and only there we find forgiveness for our failures. There, and only there, we find rest for our souls. There and, and not in worldly things, do we find our greatest joy and treasure. So that there and only there we find life – the only life worth living, the life that lasts forever.

It's coming – of that you can be sure. Eternal rest, eternal joy, eternal glory. You can be sure because of six little words Jesus says. Peter must have missed them, and maybe we did, too. **And after three days, rise again.** He did. There's your proof – that your sins are forgiven, that eternal life is yours, and that after your cross-filled days, the crown of glory awaits you, for Jesus' sake. Amen.