

Once upon a time there was a woman who had lived a long life. She had her share of joys and achievements; of love, friendship and family; but as life continued she also had pains and sorrows. In other words, the woman had a cross to bear. It seemed to be getting too heavy. So one day she went to heaven and demanded a different cross. St. Peter asked an angel to escort her inside so she could find a cross she felt fit her better. The angel led her to a warehouse. What's this, the woman asked. This is the cross warehouse, said the angel. Everyone who comes here lays his or her cross down before going farther in. You should be able to find one here that suits you. So the woman began shopping around. One time she thought she'd try on an attractive little thing, not too small, but compact enough to not be a strain. However, when she tried lifting it she realized that it was made of lead. She realized that looking at someone else's cross does not tell us how heavy it might be. For the fun of it she then tried a big cross that would certainly attract attention. But though it looked big it was so light that she would have been embarrassed to bear it. The woman finally picked up one cross near the door and said, ah, this is the one, good fit, heavy enough to be an honest-to-good cross, but not too much for me to handle. The angel exploded, lady that's the cross you came here with.

Cross bearing seems to be an inescapable part of human life. Jesus tells us to welcome our cross, confident that no matter how painful it might be, God's love will not be over-whelmed. But the question remains why must we carry a cross at all. After all a cross is not pleasant. It really is a torture to face the big crosses of our lives. Couldn't God just get rid of them for us?

Wasn't it enough that Jesus bore his cross? If he's our Savior, why wasn't just His crucifixion enough to cover for all of us? what good does a cross do?

The church has always said that it is the cross, not the empty tomb that saves. One of the key messages of the prophets is that God suffers. God is heart-broken over what people do to one another, and to themselves, when they abandoned love. When God came among us, the suffering of God and the suffering of humanity were united in Jesus. The crosses we bear do not merely bring us closer to God, they make us like God, the God who suffers. Does this mean that suffering is good and we should seek it out for ourselves and not strive to ease it for others? No, suffering is not God's will for the world. The suffering of the world breaks God's heart. Christ's call for us to take up the cross is an invitation to learn that the suffering is always with us. Though it may make us think God is far from us, it is actually a share in the life of God, who also takes up the cross.

Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

Among Jesus' many teachings we find this, rather harsh-sounding, invitation: Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

What, concretely, does Jesus mean by this?

Taking up our cross daily and giving up life in order to find deeper life has a rich, profound and multifaceted meaning. **We can become like God and take up our cross whenever we believe in death and Resurrection, in our lives.**

First, it means accepting that suffering is a part of our lives. Accepting our cross means that, at some point, we have to make peace with the unchangeable fact that frustration, disappointment, pain, misfortune, illness, unfairness, sadness, and death are a part of our lives and they must ultimately be accepted without bitterness. As long as we nurse the notion that pain in our lives is something we need not accept, we will regularly find ourselves bitter, for not having accepted the cross.

Second, taking up our cross and giving up our lives, means that we may not, in our suffering, pass on any bitterness to those around us. We have a strong instinct, to make others suffer when we are suffering: If I'm unhappy, I will make sure that others around me are unhappy too! This does not mean, that we cannot share our pain with others. But there's a healthy way of doing this, where our sharing leaves others free, as opposed to an unhealthy kind of sharing which tries to make others unhappy because we are unhappy. There's a difference between healthily groaning under the weight of our pain and unhealthily whining in self-pity and bitterness under that weight. Jesus groaned under the weight of his cross, but no self-pity, whining, or bitterness came from his mouth or his beaten-up body.

Third, when Jesus invites us to die in order to find life, he is not, first of all, talking about physical death. If we live in adulthood, there are a bunch of other deaths that we must undergo before we die physically. Both growing up to maturity and Christian discipleship are about regularly naming our deaths, mourning our losses, letting go of what's died, and receiving new spirit for the new life that we are now living. These are the stages

of the paschal mystery, our daily dying and rising with Jesus.

Fourth, it means that we must wait for the resurrection, that here in this life all plans have to remain unfinished. So much of life and discipleship is about waiting, waiting in frustration, with injustice, with pain, in longing, battling bitterness, as we wait for something or someone to come and change our situation. We spend about 98% of our lives waiting for fulfillment, either in small or big ways. Jesus' invitation to us to follow him implies waiting, accepting to live with unfinished plans.

Fifth, carrying our cross daily means accepting that God's gift to us is often not what we expect. God always answers our prayers but, often times, by giving us what we really need rather than what we think we need. The Resurrection, does not come when we expect it and rarely fits our notion of how a resurrection should happen. To carry your cross is to be open to surprise.

Finally, taking up your cross and being willing to give up your life means living in a faith that believes that nothing is impossible for God. This means accepting that God is greater than the human imagination. Indeed, whenever we surrender to the notion that God cannot offer us a way out of our pain into some kind of newness, it's precisely because we have reduced God down to the size of our own limited imagination. It's only possible to accept our cross, to live in trust, and to not grow bitter inside pain if we believe in possibilities beyond what we can imagine, namely, if we believe in the Resurrection.

We can only take up our cross when we believe in the Resurrection.