

When you cross the continental divide, there's usually a sign with a line. The line marks the boundary between two watersheds. Often the sign says something to the effect of, "If a raindrop falls on this side of the line, it will eventually make its way to the Atlantic Ocean. If it falls on this side of the line, it will flow to the Pacific Ocean." If you're a raindrop, that line makes all the difference. Your destiny is tied to which side of that line you're on.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is at THE watershed point in Mark. The boundary line, the continental divide in Mark takes place in the 8th chapter.

The first four verses we read in our Gospel lesson are the climax, the pinnacle of the first half of Mark. Everything has been leading up to this point.

In first half of Mark there is a repeating pattern. People don't know who Jesus truly is.

In Mark, the reader knows who Jesus is from the beginning. Mark said it in chapter 1 verse 1: He is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God.

And the demons know who Jesus is in the first half of Mark. As one of them says to him in chapter 1: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?... I know who you are, the Holy One of God."¹

But while the readers of Mark and the demons in Mark know who Jesus is, the disciples and the people that Jesus interacts with don't really know who he is. And so there's a repeating pattern.

Jesus does miraculous things. And over and over again we're told that the people are astounded, or the people are amazed, or the people ask, "Who is this guy? What kind of man can do these things?"

But no one truly knows who Jesus really is. They wonder. But they never quite get who he really is.

So today we hear Jesus say to his disciples, 'How about you guys?' "Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter says, "You are the Messiah." 'You're the Christ. You're God's anointed leader who will come and save us.'

It's a great answer. It's an answer that steps out in faith. 'Lord, after hanging out with you all this time, we know you're something special. You are the one God has sent to lead, and because we believe that, we'll follow.' For the first time, Jesus' disciples begin to get it, they begin to understand who he is. Gold star for Peter.

¹ Mk 1:21

But then we hit that watershed moment. We cross the line. We cross the continental divide.

You may remember from your US History about the Lewis and Clark Expedition. In 1805, Lewis and Clark crossed reached the continental divide just above the spring that was the headwaters of the Missouri River.

As they climbed to the top of the mountain, they had very concrete expectations of what was on the other side. They were expecting to hit the top of the mountain, and maybe see the Pacific Ocean. Or failing that, they were expecting to see plains like the ones they had just crossed leading down to the Pacific.

But that's not what they saw. Instead when they got to the top of the mountain, they saw more mountains. The Bitterroot Mountain range stretched out before them, mountain after mountain after mountain, with no perceptible end in sight. They got to the divide. But things were not what they were expecting on the other side. They still had a long way to go.

When the disciples get to the divide in Mark ch8, they would have had some rather clear ideas about how things should play out:

'Jesus is the Messiah. We've figured it out now. That means that job #1 for him is to bring us freedom. Let the revolution begin. Jesus is going to lead the revolt. And the end result will be national independence. The Romans, the foreign occupiers will be kicked out. And we'll have our own country back.'

That's what they're expecting. Political and military victory over Israel's enemies. And freedom for the Jewish people.

But when they hit the great divide with Jesus, he paints an entirely different picture from the one they're expecting. The disciples expect to see the beginning of the revolution. But Jesus shows them that there are different mountains left to cross.

Jesus begins to teach them that he must "undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."

Suffer? Be killed? What kind of play book is that for a military leader?

Imagine General Patton saying, "Okay boys, here's the battle plan: I must suffer many things at the hands of the enemy, and eventually be killed." It makes no sense.

Messiahs win by inflicting suffering and killing Israel's enemies. They're not supposed to suffer and die themselves.

Peter says as much. Peter begins to rebuke Jesus. Rebuke is a very strong word. It's what you do to a demon. Peter must be thinking something like, 'Jesus must have something really wrong with him if he's talking about suffering. Let's get our Messiah back on track.'

But Jesus, in turn, rebukes Peter. He says, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus is saying, 'You think there's something wrong with me? Well Peter, that kind of thinking comes from the evil one. If you think that way, you're setting yourself in opposition to God's plan. You want to be my follower?'

"(Then) deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me."

'You say I'm the Messiah. That's great. But if you want to follow me as Messiah, you need to get on board with my game plan. Follow me by taking up your cross.'

There's a wonderful process Peter is going through here. It's a process that all of us have to go through.

First it's important to recognize who Jesus is, to acclaim him as Lord, to put your trust in him as your Savior. That's an important first step. But that's only the beginning of your faith journey. The rest of the journey involves living into what it really means to be a follower of Jesus. It means living into the pattern of the cross.

This is something like a romantic relationship. You date someone for awhile. You really like this person. And one day you realize that it's more than just "like." And so you summon up all your courage and say, "I love you." That's an important moment.

But a relationship doesn't end with the first I love you (at least assuming that statement doesn't scare the other person off). The first "I love you" simply marks the beginning of living into what that statement means.

What does it mean to love someone? What does it mean to love someone for better for worse, for richer for poorer? You don't discover that when you first say, "I love you." You discover that years and years after saying, "I love you." It takes living into a loving relationship to discover what love is all about.

Peter says, 'Jesus, you are the Messiah.' Great. Wonderful.

But now, Peter, you have to live with the tough things that follow that statement: taking up your own cross and following a Messiah who suffers and dies.

Remember, Jesus did not have to go to the cross. He could have gotten out of it at any number of points. But he went to the cross voluntarily as a servant. He went to the cross out of love for us all.

Jesus doesn't say, "Endure your cross." He says, "Take up your cross. Choose your cross, and follow me. Follow me out of love. Follow me as servant."

For most of us in our comfortable 21st century American society, taking up our cross will not involve death or martyrdom as it did for many early Christians.

Also, taking up your cross is not about stoically accepting something you're stuck with. It's not about putting on a brave face and just toughing things out.

Instead, for most of us, taking up our cross will be about choosing sacrifice or suffering in order to love and serve others. It's choosing to sacrifice and give of yourself on behalf of others, even when you could evade it.

It's choosing to stay with someone after saying, "I love you." It's hanging in there with them for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health.

When you take up a cross, you are voluntarily taking up a burden. You are very literally burdening yourself with someone else's life. You choose to walk with them, and suffer with them. And sharing in someone else's suffering is often a tougher kind of suffering than suffering yourself.

You parents, is it easier to be sick yourself, or to be around your kids when they're sick? Those of you who have lost spouses or family members to injury or cancer or other diseases: Which is harder? To suffer yourself, or to watch someone you love suffering?

It's often far more difficult to watch someone you love suffering. And yet, hanging in there with someone else, someone you love, in the midst of their suffering, that's often an important part of what taking up your cross is all about. Walking with someone in their pain, in their struggles, is one of the most loving things we can do as Christians.

We are usually willing to take those sorts of burdens upon ourselves for a spouse, or a child, or someone close to us. And those are VERY important things. But the Gospel also calls us to stretch ourselves further. How willing are we to expand our circle? How willing are we to take on the burdens of people who are outside our immediate circle?

It's all too easy for us to develop spiritual calluses. We can keep our shields up. We can build walls, stay behind them, and keep other people's suffering at arm's length.

But Jesus calls us to step out of our comfort zones. Open up, even a little bit. Reach out. Help someone out. Be there for them in their suffering. Walk with them. Ease their burden. For most of us, that's what taking up your cross is all about.

It's important to know who Jesus is, to proclaim him as Lord and Savior. But you've got to cross over to the other side of the divide. You have to walk in his footsteps and seek to do what he would do.

This week, reach out in love to someone. Stretch yourself this week, even a little bit. In doing so, take up your cross and follow.