LAKEWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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Jesus Saves
Matthew 16: 21-18

As some of you know we took a group of LPC youth to Montreat this summer. Many of you have been there. There is well known trail, where you hike up Mt Lookout, where you are rewarded with a beautiful view if you get to the top. Ive been to Montreat a few times and have never done this hike. So, this year, Susan, Travis, Connor and I set off. When we reported back on the trip, I joked that I helped Travis and Connor make it to the top, the truth is, It didn't take long for the boys to realize they were leaving Susan and I behind. They were moving a lot faster.

It was a bit of a hike for these old lungs. I stopped for a break quite often. I have to admit about half up when we came to another trail that went off to the side and probably back down it did cross my mind that this may be the way to go, an easy trail and a tough trail. But I knew the only way to the beautiful view was up. If you have done that hike you know that the last 30 feet or so are not trail, they are climbing on rock. It was not what I expected. Fortunately, it was so close to the top that none of us were turning back at that point.

There are moments in life when we have a choice of trails, the easier one or the hard one. And to get where we need to be, we have to take the hard one. There are also times when we realize that the road ahead is not going to be the road we expected.

Maybe you thought your career would turn out differently. Maybe you expected retirement to be easier, or your health to be stronger, or a relationship to last longer. Maybe you imagined your family would look different. Maybe Hebrew in seminary was way harder than you anticipated it would be.

We all have ideas about how life is supposed to go.

And sometimes we even have ideas about how God is supposed to work.

Today's passage shows that Peter certainly did.
We are still in Matthew 16 and if you have been following along over the last few weeks, you will remember that last week we spoke about Jesus asking his disciples who they thought he was and Peter nailed it by saying he was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Peter got it right.
Then we read this passage that immediately follows.
This time, Peter gets it terribly wrong.
Jesus begins to explain what being the Messiah means. He tells the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be rejected, be killed, and be raised on the third day.
And Peter cannot accept it. He is not having it.
Peter takes Jesus aside and says, essentially, "Lord, this can't happen. This isn't how the story is supposed to go." And Jesus responds with some of the strongest words he ever speaks to one of his disciples: "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter, who had just been called the rock, is now called a stumbling block.
Why such a harsh response?
Because Peter had understood the identity of Jesus, but he had not yet understood the mission of Jesus. Peter wanted a Messiah without a cross. Peter expected the Messiah to bring victory, power, glory, and restoration. He did not expect suffering. He certainly did not expect a crucified Messiah.
Perhaps we can relate to Peter. None of us really want a life that involves a cross. We want all to go well, we'd rather take the easier trail, thank yo very much.
But Jesus makes it clear: **the cross is not an interruption of God's plan. The cross is the plan.** That is difficult for Peter to hear. Perhaps also for us.
Jesus says. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "If you want to follow me, take up your comfortable chair." He says, "Take up your cross."

The cross represents sacrifice. It represents surrender. The disciples would have understood the cross to be a symbol of death. It represents dying to ourselves so that we might truly live for God.

Following Jesus is not simply about adding Christianity to the life we already have. It is about allowing Jesus to reshape the life we already have.

Then Jesus says something that sounds almost backwards: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” Jesus forces us to redefine our idea of success. It is not looking out for number 1. It is not getting what you deserve, it is not gaining possessions,

Jesus asks, “What will it profit you to gain the whole world but forfeit your life?” That's a question worth sitting with.

Imagine having everything the world could offer. Every possession you ever wanted.

And Jesus says, “What does it profit you to gain the whole world and lose your soul?”

The good news is that Jesus isn't telling us that possessions, careers, accomplishments, or success are inherently bad. He is asking us to put them in their proper place. And to use what we have for His kingdom.

We Don't let the things we possess become the things that possess us.

We Don't allow success to become our identity, or our career to become our worth.

Jesus invites us to something deeper. He invites us to lose our lives in him so that we can discover what life was really meant to be.

Sometimes we hear the phrase “take up your cross” and think it means that we have to endure some terrible burden. Certainly, life contains suffering that we don't choose. None of us are exempt from that. But the cross Jesus talks about is more than simply suffering.

It is choosing faithfulness even when faithfulness costs us something. Taking up our cross can mean forgiving someone when we would rather hold a grudge. It can mean telling the truth when a lie would be easier. It can mean serving when nobody notices, and then not telling anyone about it.

It can mean loving someone who cannot give us anything in return. It can mean standing up for someone on the fringes. It can mean giving generously when we would rather keep everything for ourselves. It can mean putting aside our pride and saying, “I was wrong.”
It can mean choosing God's will over our own.
And sometimes it means doing the ordinary things of Christian discipleship over and over again. Praying. Worshiping. Serving. Giving. Encouraging. Forgiving. Loving. Showing up.
Taking up our cross isn't necessarily one dramatic moment. More often, it is a thousand small decisions to follow Jesus.
One of the beautiful things about this passage is that Jesus doesn't merely tell us to take up our cross. He goes first. Jesus doesn't ask us to walk a road he hasn't walked himself.
He says that he will go to Jerusalem. He will suffer. He will be rejected. He will die. And then he will be raised. That's important. Because Christianity isn't ultimately about suffering.
It is about **resurrection**. The cross is not the end of the story. The grave is not the end of the story. Death is not the end of the story. Jesus says he will be raised on the third day.
That means when Jesus calls us to take up our cross, he is not calling us toward meaningless suffering. He is calling us toward resurrection life.
There are things in our lives that may need to die so something new can be born.
Our pride may need to die. Our bitterness may need to die. Our need to control everything may need to die. Our selfishness may need to die. And when those things die, God can bring something new to life.
Remember where this conversation with Peter began. Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Then he made it personal: “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered correctly: “You are the Messiah.”
But knowing who Jesus is means more than knowing the right answer. It means allowing that answer to change how we live. If Jesus really is the

Messiah, then he gets to define discipleship. If Jesus really is Lord, then we don't get to follow him only when his direction agrees with ours. If Jesus really is Savior, then we have to trust him even when we don't understand the road ahead.

Peter wanted Jesus to follow Peter's expectations. Jesus invited Peter to follow Jesus. Jesus invited Peter to walk to harder trail. The trail he did not expect.

And that may be the question for us today. Are we asking Jesus to bless the life we've already designed? Or are we willing to let Jesus redesign our lives? There is a difference.

One says, “Jesus, come along with me.” The other says, “Jesus, I'll follow you.”

Jesus Saves.

That salvation goes through the cross, there is no avoiding it. The cross tells us that God's strength can look like weakness. God's victory can look like defeat. God's glory can look like suffering. And God's greatest act of love can look, for a moment, like the darkest moment in history.

But three days later, the tomb was empty. And because the tomb was empty, we can trust God with our lives.

What does it mean for you to deny yourself? What needs to die in you? What cross is Jesus asking you to carry? Maybe it is a cross of forgiveness. Maybe it is a cross of service. Maybe it is a cross of generosity. Maybe it is simply the decision to trust God with something you have been trying desperately to control.

Whatever it is, remember this:

Jesus never asks us to walk the road alone. He has already walked the road. He has already carried the cross. He has already entered the tomb. And he has already conquered death. So take up your cross. Follow Jesus. Trust him with the road ahead. And remember that the cross is never the final word. Because the final word belongs to resurrection. The harder trail leads to the beautiful view.

Amen.