



SERMON RECAP MARCH 22, 2026

Fifth Sunday of Lent
“Mocked, Insulted, Executed”
Matthew 27:27-44

When Michael B. Jordan accepted the Academy Award for best actor last Sunday, there was a direct line from him to this story. It is not an obvious connection, but Simon of Cyrene is an important figure in the history of Black theology and culture.

We do not know much about the man who helped Jesus carry his cross. We know that the writer of the Gospel of John did not like this detail in the story as John 19:17 stats that Jesus went to Golgotha “carrying his cross by himself.”

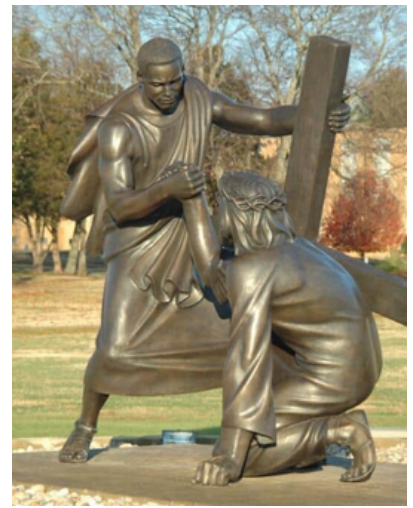
The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) all share the detail about Simon, and from these three accounts we learn that Simon was coming “from the countryside,” was compelled by the Romans, was the father of Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21), and was “from Cyrene,” which is modern day Libya.

Because Simon is from Libya, an African nation, many have considered him to be black. Because his sons Rufus and Alexander are mentioned in Mark, it is assumed that Simon and his family became believers. Mark’s audience must have recognized them as important leaders in their community. In Romans 16:13, Paul writes “Say hello to Rufus, who is an outstanding believer.” It is totally plausible that the Rufus Paul greets at the end of his letter to the Romans was the son of Simon the Cyrene.

Through much of Christian tradition, Simon has been considered dark in complexion. And while “blackness” in the American sense of races wasn’t invented until the 1600s, Simon’s blackness and African-ness has been important to a significant portion of the Church. In the United States Black Church of history, Simon’s faith and determination has been lifted up among those seeking dignity for an entire race of marginalized people.

Now, here comes the connection to Michael B. Jordan. In 1917 Ridgely Torrence wrote a series of one act plays that were presented together as “Plays for a Negro Theater.” One of the plays was called Simon the Cyrenian. It told a fictional story of Simon as a black, African revolutionary, “the most dangerous man in the Empire.”

Oakwood University’s “Monument to Service” is also known as “Black Simon helps Jesus.” The bronze statue in Huntsville, Alabama serves as a focal point of the campus of the Historically Black College founded by Seventh Day Adventists in 1896.



“Black folk claim Simon with reference not to geography but to identity. Simon’s blackness is truth-telling and empowering. It names the ongoing reality of social hostility and forced labor imposed upon blacks the world over. It also names the dignity, power, and humanity black people have had in the face of half a millennium of such oppression. Simon of Cyrene, the black man in society, helping God carry his burden.”

(quote from a umcjustice.org Lenten reflection)

In Torrence’s play, Simon came to Jerusalem to join with Barabbas and start a violent revolution, but in the course of his time near Jesus, he was converted to his nonviolent way of life. He is depicted as a man of deep faith and integrity, and a hero of nonviolence. What is most remarkable about the play however, is that it was a dramatic, emotional story played by black actors, bucking the long-standing tradition of using white actors in blackface. Until this moment in American theater, black actors were only used as minstrels, comic relief, overtly stereo-typed, clown-like figures.

Reviews of the play gave high praise to the black actors - although the overall storyline as well as the reviews were largely paternalistic, this was still a groundbreaking moment in American history. Simon the Cyrene provided a chance for black Americans to demand their humanity, emotional depth, and artistic skill.

This Biblical passage we read today is full of human cruelty. It reveals the ugly side of our collective soul, tarnished by violence and mob thinking. In the midst of it however, is the African man who stands up. He helps Jesus, and provides a brief glimpse of humanity. It is no wonder he has been such an important figure in the narrative of the Church. It is reminder of the importance of story within the Biblical text. The way we interpret Scripture matters. We know precious little about Simon from the Bible, but the way we use Scripture matters. Here, it can help us tell a story of integrity, courage, and help us cling to humanity in the midst of a cruel and addicted-to-violence world.