

Sermon, September 14, 2025

Holy Cross Day

"The Sign of the Cross"

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

"When a man gets too big for his britches, I say goodbye" – Davy Crockett

But what do you do when you're that man's mother and you really can't say goodbye so easily? That was the Empress Helena's problem. Her kid? The Emperor Constantine, perhaps one of the most famous emperor's in Roman history. What did he do?

Constantine conquered plenty of territory, won a civil war, defeated multiple barbarian tribes, introduced coinage that remained pivotal for hundreds of years, reorganized the Roman bureaucracy, and founded a city that still exists (Constantinople, now called Istanbul). But other emperors have similar accomplishments on their resumes, and they don't get called "the Great". The reason Constantine gets the appellation is because he is the one who decided that Christianity would be the state religion, no longer a persecuted minority. And our world has never been the same since; Christianity either. Constantine's head got a little big, britches too I guess. So what was Mom to do?

You see whether Constantine was really into this religion stuff is not really known. He may have named Christianity the state religion for political expediency (any comparison to other political figures today is strictly intended). But Mom, well, mom was another story. She got religion and decided to take a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see where this all got started. She was no spring chicken when she did this, 77 by any historians best guess.

In the year 326 CE Helena's pious quest led her to the site of Christ's crucifixion. Through divine guidance and the assistance of Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem, she unearthed three crosses buried beneath a pagan temple. To discern which cross belonged to the Christ, each was touched to a gravely ill woman. When the third cross miraculously healed her, it was declared the True Cross of Christ. As she lifted the sacred wood, legend says she discovered a patch of fragrant herbs growing beneath it. This plant, with its kingly aroma, would come to be known as basil - the "royal herb" - forever linked to the Cross of Christ. Following this momentous discovery, Emperor Constantine ordered the construction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to house the precious relic. The church was solemnly dedicated on September 13-14, 335 AD, marking the beginning of the annual celebration of the Holy Cross. And here we are today. To this as well as the whole concept of pilgrimages to holy places, we say thank you, Helena.

If you were in Oviedo, Spain today you might take part in an outdoor procession led by a very large cross. In Armenia, you would go outside to bless the four corners of the world with a processional cross adorned with basil. In Ethiopia or Eritrea, you would have had large bonfires on the eve of the feast.

So what's that to us living in this increasingly non-religious part of the world to which the announcement that we were celebrating Holy Cross Day was greeted with raised eyebrows, what's that, and Oh we can put red out cool! And while we don't have such unique and public events as other parts of the world, is the cross not everywhere?

It's on our steeples and in our chancels. We carry the cross in procession and embroider it on our vestments and altar hangings. Some of us wear cross necklaces or even have cross tattoos. In baptism, we are physically marked with the cross of Christ, and we make the sign of the cross on our bodies.

In the epistle we just heard, Paul relates the signs of Jesus' crucifixion to his own body. *From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.*

Some would interpret these as the actual physical injuries Paul received as he described in 2 Corinthians, including 195 lashes, three times being beaten with rods, and being stoned once. You see Paul was very argumentative with these Galatians and this is the last thing he says in that letter. He also says *May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!*

This underscores and bolsters Paul's main thesis to the Galatians: it is not that circumcision does not save while non-circumcision does; it is that neither one saves. This in turn constitutes a whole new way of being which absolutely transcends these either/or categories. This Paul calls a new creation: the utterly new way of being for those in Christ, made right with God by faith and thereby set free to be and to live in a new, distinction-free form of life.

A distinction-free form of life – how lovely. And that is nothing more than salvation itself. Salvation that comes to us through the cross of Christ. This is how Frederick Buechner describes salvation,

Salvation is an experience first and a doctrine second.

Doing the work you're best at doing and like to do best, hearing great music, having great fun, seeing something very beautiful, weeping at somebody else's tragedy – all these experiences are related to the experience of salvation because in all of them two things happen: (1) you lose yourself, and (2) you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.

Applying this to God, we don't love God to be saved. To love God is to be saved. To love anybody is a significant step along the way.

You do not love God and live for him so you will go to heaven. Whichever side of the grave you happen to be talking about, to love God and live for him is heaven.

It is a gift, not an achievement.

Holy Cross Day is a day to give thanks for that gift. The gift of salvation through something as incongruous as a cross. It may come with some cost as the "marks of Jesus" can be applied to other forms of suffering and sacrifice we might endure for our faith, such as giving up relationships, stress or division within a family because of religious belief, changing careers, or facing rejection, all of which leave their own marks on a person's life. But as Paul would say it is totally worth the cost – this experience of salvation and transformation.

So we don't need our bonfire or our grand processions today. Perhaps like any unanticipated gift we only need to say thank you. And as Meister Eckhart has said "If the only prayer you say in life is "thank you", it will be enough.