

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“Behold, the life-giving cross, on which was hung the salvation of the whole world!” Most of us recognize these words from the Good Friday liturgy, sung as a wooden cross is processed into the nave. But it is not done to venerate the cross as a relic. Rather, as we continue — “O come, let us worship Him!” — we do it in remembrance of Him who hung from that cross as “the salvation of the whole world,” Jesus Christ our Lord. His sacrifice on a cross — *“the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29) — is what makes the shocking events of that day good, and that’s what makes the symbol of the cross for us holy. And that’s what we Lutherans remember on this Holy Cross Day, not the cross as an object of worship itself.

Some Christians do venerate the cross not as a symbol of our faith, but as a relic. That is an abuse that Luther was not completely successful in erasing from the church. Nevertheless, as Luther wrote in the Large Catechism: *“Abuse does not destroy the essence, but confirms it. For gold is not the less gold though a harlot wear it in sin and shame”* (Large Catechism, Part 4 Baptism, 59). St. Paul makes it clear that when he boasts *“in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,”* he is thinking of Christ’s crucifixion, *“by which the world has been crucified to [him], and [he] to the world”* (Gal. 6:14). In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says it this way: *“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”* (1 Cor. 2:2). And when Luther penned his well known adage *“The cross alone is our theology,”*¹ he was using the word “cross” figuratively, as a symbol for Jesus’ crucifixion.

The origin of this festival is a little unclear. In the East, it commemorates the finding of the cross of Christ by Emperor Constantine’s mother Helen and the dedication of the churches of the Holy Sepulchre and at Calvary. It was celebrated already in the 4th century AD. In the West, it began with the recovery of the cross of Christ from the Persians who had carried it off in 614. Emperor Heraclius recovered it fifteen years later and brought it back to Jerusalem with pomp. That’s interesting. But, as the story goes, when Heraclius got to the “Holy Places,” “he was not able to forward.” It was “suggested to him that his imperial spender was hardly in agreement with the humble appearance of Christ when He bore His cross through the streets of that city.” The emperor then “laid aside his purple and his crown, put on simple clothes, [and] went along barefoot with the procession” in order to lay the cross in its rightful place (Butler’s Lives of the Saints, III:551). I don’t buy it, but it makes for a good legend.

¹ WA 5.176.32, quoted in “The Cross Alone is our Theology,” Rev. Matthew Zickler, December 19, 2017, resources.lcms.org/history/the-cross-alone-is-our-theology/

Surely, the cross is the foremost symbol of the Christian faith. Not that there aren't others; but the cross is the main one. When you see a cross, you think right away of Christ and of His church. Rightly, then, do crosses adorn our churches inside and out—and the best crosses are those that have the tortured body of Jesus hanging on them. Churches, ancient and modern, are in the shape of a cross—like Zion is. And many people, in an acknowledgment of their Christian faith, adorn their bodies with cross pendants and bracelets, and some people even tattoos. Last Sunday, we saw the sign of the cross traced over the mind and heart of our newest member, and Christians here and around the world make the sign of the cross upon themselves.

For Christ crucified, and the instrument of His death — the cross — are not merely incidental to the Christian message. They are central to it and cannot be shoved aside for some other more upbeat or perhaps more relevant message — like doing something about the world's climate or organizing to protest on behalf of immigrants. That's not a Christian message, and it doesn't make disciples. The message of Christ crucified — the very heart of the Gospel — does. And that message is closely connected to the Sacrament that does make disciples ... baptism: *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"* (Rom. 6:3-4).

Disciples are made by teaching what Jesus said: *"faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ"* (Rom. 10:17), namely, "I have come to give you life, and that by laying down my life for you" (John 10:10-11). "I'm going to suffer and die and rise again, and I'm going to do it for you, to forgive you, to ransom you from your sinful, futile ways" (Luke 9:21-22).

This is the Gospel. People are saved by this foolish message: *"Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God."* We preach it though many consider it folly and others consider it offensive. But this *"word of the cross"* is *"the power of God"* for *"us who are being saved."* It's not a message to be ashamed of, *"for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe..."* (Rom. 1:16).

Hearing this *"word of Christ"* brings faith, for being a disciple means looking up in faith to the Son of Man who hung on the cross, that we might receive the gift of eternal life. It means trusting Jesus when he says that by his being *"lifted up from the earth"* on a cross would the judgment of the world take place, and that by this death would the ruler of this world, the devil, be defeated and cast out. Being a disciple means that we listen to Jesus as He draws people to Himself, that we heed His call. It means casting aside our own views of what glory is and believe truly that the cross is the glory of the Son of Man. It means living as Christians in the

confusing status of hating one's life in the world, of denying self and taking up his cross and following after Jesus, and paradoxically therein finding glory. *"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."*

For this is the Son's glory: falling to the earth and dying. This is the Father's glory: a Son who keeps His Father's commands, who does His Father's will, who lays down His life by being lifted up, *"for so must the Son of Man be lifted up"* (John 3:14). Like the serpent in the wilderness, God's Son was lifted up for you, that gazing at Him you might be drawn to Him in faith and not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

The Seed, prophesied long ago in the garden, came as promised, sent by God, born of woman. That Seed fell to the ground and died; that Seed was planted for three days in the ground; that Seed sprouted forth in resurrection glory; and you, who trust in Him, are His fruit to whom He will grant the same resurrection glory.

This is what we glory in on this Holy Cross Day: in Jesus Christ, the crucified, in His life-giving cross, in our salvation. Today, we glory in the tree by which this world's prince has been overcome. We glory in His body broken on the tree of the cross and in His blood shed there. We glory in the living body and blood of Jesus given you today in the Sacrament. We glory in our baptisms that unites us to Jesus and in the word of the cross preached to us by which we are preserved in saving faith in Him. We glory in Christ, in Whom is salvation, life, and resurrection from the dead, by Whom we are redeemed and set at liberty.

"Behold, the life-giving cross, on which was hung the salvation of the whole world! O come, let us worship Him," who sets before us today His sumptuous meal of forgiveness.

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.