

In the year 313 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine did something that would change the course of human history: he legalized Christianity. It had taken 280 years, but Christians could finally openly worship in the Roman Empire.

Among those enjoying this new legal status was Constantine's own mother, Helena, who had become a Christian a year earlier. And as a new Christian, Helena wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She wanted to see where Christ had walked and taught. Where he had died and where he had risen from the dead.

But 280 years is a long time. Many of the locations had been forgotten. So Helena set to work mapping the region for future pilgrims, like herself. Researching the locations and then building churches on the sites to mark them for those who wished to worship there.

Not surprisingly, what interested Helena the most was the location of Jesus' tomb. According to legend, an earlier pagan Roman emperor had a temple to Venus built on top of it, to discourage pilgrims from visiting, but Helena had it torn down and excavated. Inside she found a cross. The cross on which Jesus had been crucified.

And on that site she had a church built. It wouldn't be finished for several years and Helena herself would die before it was completed. But on September 14, 330 A.D. the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was opened to pilgrims for the first time. And the Feast of the Holy Cross was established throughout Christianity.

How much of that legend is true? Who knows. We don't recognize Holy Cross Day so that we can adore the wood of the cross itself, as a relic. We keep it to honor the great victory Christ won upon that cross. Holy Cross Day is not about superstition. It's about salvation. It's about what happened there for us and for our salvation.

Our readings point us back to this truth. Numbers 21 tells us of Israel's rebellion in the wilderness. Once again, the people grumbled against God and Moses: *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."*

So the Lord sent fiery serpents, and their venom brought death into the camp. The people cried out for help, and the Lord gave Moses strange instructions: make a serpent of bronze, set it up on a pole, and whoever is bitten shall look at it and live.

That serpent was not magic. Just like the water of Holy Baptism or the bread and wine of Holy Communion, this bronze serpent was God's promise attached to a visible sign. The cure was not found in the metal of the serpent or the wood of the pole, but in God's Word. Whoever looked in faith to what God had provided was healed.

Fast forward to the Gospel reading where Jesus says, *"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself."* John explains, *"He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die."* Jesus is the true serpent lifted up. The bronze serpent foreshadowed Him. Just as the Israelites were healed by looking at God's provision on the pole, so we are saved by looking to Christ crucified.

But notice something: God didn't remove the serpents from Israel's camp. Their bites still brought death. What God gave was a way of healing, a way of life through death. So also, God does not remove all suffering or evil from our world. He does not promise us a pain-free life. Instead, He gives us a serpent on a pole. He gives us His Son, lifted up for us. There, in this memorial of death, we find life.

And that is the paradox. That's the scandal. The cross is the place where sin is judged and forgiven, where death is destroyed by dying, where life comes through the grave. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that *"the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."* To the world, a crucified Savior makes no sense. A man who dies in disgrace is a fraud and a failure. But for those who believe, it is the wisdom of God, the power of God, the very heart of the Gospel.

This is why we need Holy Cross Day. We live in a culture that prefers to skip past the cross and jump right to the crown. Even in churches, we sometimes prefer symbols of glory without suffering. How often have you heard, “We shouldn't use crucifixes. They're too Catholic”?

But the cross with the body of Christ upon it is not a Roman Catholic tradition. It is a Christian confession. It is what St. Paul meant when he said, “*We preach Christ crucified.*” A plain cross may remind us of the fact of execution just fine. But the crucifix shows us who died there and why. It proclaims: Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

When you see the crucifix, you see the very center of your faith: Christ for you, Christ in your place. Your body should be on that cross. You deserve to be where his body hanging. Don't avoid that reminder. I certainly don't. I wear a crucifix everyday. Not because it's pretty, but because it's grotesque. The crucifixion was a horrific thing.

And we need to look at it and be reminded that Jesus willingly went to this horrible death for you and for me. The crucifix is a testimony to what we believe, teach, and confess: that our salvation was won not by our effort, but by Christ's suffering and death on the cross.

The bronze serpent was lifted high so that all could see and live. So also, Christ was lifted high upon the cross, that all might look and live. Not just Israel, but all nations. John tells us that some Greeks came to Philip and said, “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” They were curious about Jesus. They had heard of his miracles. They had heard of his teaching. They wanted to know more.

Jesus answered not by offering them a philosophy or a parable or a miracle, but by pointing them to His coming death: “*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*” You want to know Jesus? Who he is and what he teaches? Look at his His cross. That is where Jesus is most clearly revealed.

The Greeks came seeking wisdom, but the true wisdom is Christ crucified. The Jews sought a sign, but the true sign is Christ lifted up. The cross is the answer for them and the answer for you.

Like those rebellious Israelites in our Old Testament lesson today, every person has poison running through their veins. But it's not the venom of fiery serpents. It's the poison of sin. The poison of pride and lust, hate and greed. It's the poison of guilt, shame, and despair.

You've felt the serpent's bite. You know how it burns like fire, consuming you from the inside out. The law accuses you. Death threatens you. The devil whispers lies into your ear.

But the cross is your cure: Look and live. Look to the One lifted up for you. Look to the cross where Jesus bore your sins. Look to the crucifix and remember that His blood was shed for you, His death has destroyed death, His victory is your victory.

And then look to what came after the cross. Jesus was lifted up in death. But He was also lifted up from the grave. And then he was lifted up to the sky. Raised in glory. Ascended on high. Yet even in heaven He still bears the wounds in his hands and feet and side. He reigns on the throne as the Lamb who was slain. Even his risen body still proclaims the cross.

And that is why the Church keeps Holy Cross Day. Not to worship wood or relics, not to cling to superstition, but to glory in Christ who was crucified for us. The cross that was created by the Romans as a symbol of fear is now a symbol of comfort. The cross that once meant defeat now proclaims victory. The cross that once belonged to criminals now belongs to Christ... and to you.

So don't be ashamed of the cross. Don't be embarrassed by the crucifix. Don't shy away from preaching Christ crucified. For in Him is your healing, your forgiveness, your life. The cross is not a symbol of despair, but the very sign of hope. It is the tree of life planted in the midst of death.

Look, then, and live. Look to Jesus, lifted up for you. Look to His cross, and there behold your salvation. Amen.