

# *Sermon: Holy Cross Day*

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year B  
Isaiah 45:21-25  
Psalm 98  
Galatians 6:14-18  
John 12:31-36a

Two days ago... the church celebrated Holy Cross Day... we celebrate it today... in the Eastern Church... the feast is known as The Exaltation of the Holy Cross... and it was one of the twelve great feasts in the Byzantine liturgy... in the Roman Catholic Church... it's known as The Triumph of the Cross... here... it's known as Holy Cross Day... and the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was the first American Prayer Book to include it...

Historically... the feast has been associated with the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher... built by the Emperor Constantine... and dedicated on September 14 in the year 335... Constantine's mother Helena... supervised the construction of this church... and a relic... believed to be part of the True Cross... was discovered during the excavation... and so claims by the Church of Jerusalem to have a fragment of the True Cross... date back to the mid-300s...

The feast has also been associated with the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius... because... although the Persians stole the relic from Jerusalem in 614... when they destroyed the church that Constantine built... Heraclius recovered it from them... and although the authenticity of relics-of-the-cross may be questionable... Holy Cross Day provides an opportunity for a celebration of Christ's redeeming death on a cross... and for us to ponder what it means...

For me... the Cross is one of those theological conundrums... an enigma wrapped in a mystery... something that ought to be finite and final... but which is really infinite and eternal... and the scandal of the Cross... is that it rejects the values of Empire... and turns them on their heads... turns them upside down... the scandal of the Cross... is

that what's known to take life... in a horrific way... instead gives life... in a glorious way... the scandal of the cross is God's YES... to Empire's NO... God says... is that the best you've got... let me show you what I've got... I've got Jesus...

In the movie *The Wizard of Oz*... Dorothy's dog Toto pulls open a green curtain to reveal the real wizard... but before that... we're confronted with the Big Wizard... his disembodied head is there... but he's not really there... he's surrounded by pillars of fire... and columns of smoke... and has a booming... scary Old Testament voice... and even before Dorothy and those she meets along the Yellow Brick Road... along The Way... can make their requests known... the Wizard says he already knows what they need and want...

His request to them... to get the wicked witch's broomstick... sounds a little bit like "works righteousness"... but the journey they go on... to get it... brings out in them... those yet-as-unnamed qualities they want... and so when Toto draws the green curtain open... and the Wizard is revealed in human form... he affirms that Dorothy's three companions... already possess the brains... courage... and heart they desire... and he gives them... what we might call relics... to demonstrate their gifts... and it's the Wizard himself... who offers to take Dorothy home...

In the movie... something *seems to go wrong*... and the wizard ascends on his own... a little bit like Jesus' Ascension... but perhaps this ascension paves the way and makes it possible for what comes next... for the Advocate to come... because then... Wisdom herself... in the form of Glinda the Good Witch of the North... tells Dorothy that she's had... Emmanuel... God with her... all along... the ability achieve her heart's desire... all she has to affirm... is that there's no place like home...

It's easy to think... that when Jesus says... *when I am lifted up from the earth*... that he means... lifted up on the cross... it's easy to think that he's talking only about the method of his death... that he means... when I am lifted up and die... but he said this to

indicate *the kind of death* he was to die... and that specific kind of death included resurrection... and ascension...

Pastor Karoline Lewis wrote... the combination of these three events... crucifixion... resurrection... and ascension... are the how and then when... that Jesus will draw all people to himself... and the Farewell Discourse just a few chapters later in John... confirms that Jesus' parting words are not just in anticipation of his death... but in anticipation of his ascension... [and] perhaps [this is] a far more difficult reality to face than his inevitability in a tomb... and so if resurrection is hard to get our heads around... how much more so is this second departure...

In v. 31 of today's Gospel... *the ruler of this world*... is identified in one of my study bibles... as the Devil... the divider... but isn't death also one of the rulers of this world... aren't many of our decisions made as though we believe that death does have the final word... because in our western thinking... in our black and white... polar opposite thinking... it's got to be one or the other... right... life is good... and death isn't just difficult... but it's bad... but what if... as the Epistle says... the same mind that was in Christ Jesus... was in us... how would that affect our decisions... what if we trusted fully and always... in the eternal life we're promised... what if all our corporate decisions... were based in God's abundance... and not our fear of scarcity... how do we think... things would look... then...

So I offer an analogy... we look ahead to some time off... and go on vacation... we decide where to go... and how to get there... decide on what to do... and see when we get there... and what to bring... but then... when we're done sightseeing... and learning new things... and having our horizons broadened... and are tired... at the end of our time off... we return back home... to comfortable routines... and familiar surroundings... and we're happy to get there...

When we die... we also go back home... but to a deeper home... a more welcoming home... we're glad for the time away... to have seen and done so many things... to have loved and been loved by many people... even when we don't think we deserve that... but in this home... we have all we need... we lack nothing... we are loved completely... and unconditionally... and the things that separate us from each other are like green curtains which are drawn open... the things that separate us dissolve like wicked witches... and melt away... and we can let go of those things which may not be real... like relics... and hold on to those things which can not be any more real... or any more relational... like the love of God in Christ...

Pastor Bruce G. Epperly... [of South Congregational Church in Centerville, MA]... writes... inspired by his embodiment of a relational God... [omit] Jesus challenges his followers to take up their crosses and embrace the pain of the world... contrary to the world's focus on individual success... Jesus asserts that those who hang onto their lives will lose them... while those who are willing to lose their lives... will experience God's blessing.... this is not a matter of martyrdom... so much as the choice... [the choice...] to jettison the *isolated* ego... in favor of a wider loyalty... [and] Jesus challenges us to become big spirited in our spiritual and relational lives... drawing [larger and larger] circles that embrace all [of] creation...

Holy Cross Day... is a day... not when we celebrate Jesus' death... but the kind of death it was... which led to resurrection and ascension... that's why we say that this is not only God's story... but is our story too... so that when the time is right... we too can go home... and which leads us... in the here and now... to ask Empire... is that the best you've got... I've got Jesus...

Mike+