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“More Than a Relic”

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 12:20-33 (Numbers 21:4-9)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Holy Cross Day is one of the oldest special commemorations we have in the Church, reaching all the way back to the 4th century. It was established by the Emperor Constantine to commemorate the day his mother Helena found - it is said - the cross of Jesus in Jerusalem.

Now, did Helena *really* find the cross of Jesus? Was this an authentic discovery? Or is it just wishful thinking or an outright hoax? You'll find people on both sides of that argument. Luther railed against relics like this, which had multiplied in his day, reportedly saying that there are so many who claim to have a piece of Jesus' true cross that if you put them all together you could build an ark! (Or something like that.)

But I didn't answer the question. Did Helena really find the true cross of Jesus? Are there pieces of that cross floating around out there? Well, here's the answer: **It doesn't matter.** It doesn't matter because as St. Paul told us today: ***Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified.*** We preach not having the cross - something only for a select few - but what happened on the cross - something for all people. That the very Son of God came down from heaven, was incarnate as a man, and died with your sin, your death, your condemnation. And after atoning for your sin and dying your death as the perfect Lamb of God, He rose from the dead, defeating sin, satan, death, hell, grave, and all enemies that would separate us from God. And so we sing, as we did right before the sermon, of *the ending of the fray, and how Christ, the world's redeemer, as a victim won the day* (LSB #454, v. 1).

So in truth, it doesn't matter whether we have that actual cross or not, for we have Christ! We have the fruits of that cross, the benefits of that cross - what came from that cross and was given to us from that cross - signified by the blood and water that flowed from Jesus' side while on the cross (John 19:34). The water of baptism which joins us to Jesus' death and resurrection and makes it ours. The body and blood of the Lord's Supper which feeds us with the real Passover Lamb and gives us the forgiveness and strength we need in our journey through this world and life to our Promised Land. The cross is where that took place, but here, in these things, these means, is where it is given, where it is heard, where it is applied, where it is **for you**. And that's better. A piece of the cross cannot save, but the forgiveness won there does. And that's what we need.

But still . . . wouldn't it be cool? You know . . . to have the true cross. Maybe with a little bit of Jesus' blood on it. We could have a traveling exhibition, like they do with the dredged up artifacts of the Titanic, or the uncovered treasures from King Tut's tomb. Wouldn't it be cool . . . show people it's real, not just a story. The Greeks wanted to see Jesus, as we heard in the Gospel - let's show the world His cross! And some other stuff, too! Then they'd believe, right?

But it's not just them, is it? It's us. Baptism, Absolution, Preaching, Supper . . . it all seems so ordinary, so plain, so unimpressive, so weak. We'd like to have signs, to disprove our doubts. If not relics, cool artifacts, or undeniable proof, then maybe healing or success. And a little wisdom too please. Maybe something philosophical or scientific, but something deeper and more convincing and more impressive sounding to the world than just a condemned criminal, a bloody and dead man on a cross. Something to make it all more relevant, more stimulating, more credible.

Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. So do we. Which are you? A Jew or a Greek? A sign-demanding guy or a wisdom-seeking gal? Paul said it over 20 centuries ago and it's still true today. Just some preaching, a little splash of water and a morsel of bread and wine? That's it? We stumble over the cross, too. Over having just a dying, gory, bloody, yucky, Jesus.

What an ungrateful wretch you are! No, we are. All that Jesus has done for us on the cross and we want *more*? That's not good enough? We're not satisfied with that? Embarrassed? If so, wretches is too mild a word for us, who want not a crucified God who laid down His life for us, but an impressive God who will make us equally as impressive in the eyes of the world.

No. And as we heard: ***the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*** A crucified God is not only what we have, it is what we need.

For as Jesus told those Greeks who wanted to see Him: ***Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*** Jesus knew that death is the only way to life. And that He is the seed that must be dead and buried in order to grow the Church and make Christians, including those Greeks who wanted to see Him. They may have been seeking some impressive words or philosophy or sign from Jesus, but He instead would give them what they needed - seeing Him on the cross.

And then Jesus goes on: For ***whoever loves his life loses it.*** Or in other words, whoever seeks for life in this world and the things that we men like and come up with, our signs and wisdom and philosophy, loses it. Loses the very thing you were searching for. Because it's not in those things. But ***whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for***

eternal life. Hate there doesn't mean an emotion, but a turning away from and a turning to - to a life greater than this, more than this. Not of man.

And where is such a life that is eternal? *If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also*. And where Jesus was going when He spoke those words was the holy cross. If we want to see Him, He wants us to follow Him to the cross and know Him there. And if we want to be with Him, it must be through where He is - His death and resurrection. There simply is no other way. Just as bitten-by-serpents-Old Testament Israel had to look to the foolishness of a bronze serpent on the pole for life, so we bitten-by-satan-New Testament Israel must look to the foolishness of a dying man on a cross for life.

For the life we yearn for. For that life that death cannot end. For a life where we can mock the grave. For life when our life seems to be falling apart. For life when our sins make life seem hopeless and when the sins of others make life miserable. For life when you don't think you can go on. For life when deadly sin seems so attractive and alluring. For life when you feel completely alone. For life wherever and however you find yourself right now.

Yes, the world says that's foolishness, to find hope in such a weak and wretched man. But when that weak and wretched man is more than just a man, but the very Son of God, then it's *the foolishness of God* which, as St. Paul said, is wiser and stronger than men. It is the wisdom and strength that gets us out of the mess our wisdom and weakness keeps getting us into, time and time again. The wisdom and strength of life-restoring forgiveness.

But you may have one more question floating around in your mind: that if we don't really know whether Helena actually found the true cross of Christ, and we don't do relics anyway, *why celebrate this day?* Well, perhaps we could say, *to gospelize it*. So that not Helena, but you, find the true cross of Christ. The true cross in the proclamation of forgiveness **for you**. The true cross in the adoption of baptism **for you**. The true cross in the Body and Blood **for you**. For here is where the true cross is, **for you**. Not in a piece of wood, but in the preaching of Christ crucified and the giving of His gifts, **to you**.

And with such gifts, we sinful wretches are wretches no more, but forgiven and raised sons and daughters of God. And with such gifts, not just one day when we get that piece of wood out and marvel at it - but *every day* is then Holy Cross Day. That is, Jesus-for-me-day.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen