

I want to tell you two things about today's feast: where it comes from and what it means.

First, where does it come from? This calls for a story.

On a certain Friday afternoon in April of the year 33 A.D. three crosses were fashioned from trees in a forest outside the Jerusalem city walls. One of them received the body of a Jew named Jesus. After the crucifixion, Jesus was laid in a tomb and the cross--well, no one knew what happened to the cross.

300 years later Christianity became established as the religion of the Roman empire under Constantine. One day, Constantine's mother, Helena, received a divine inspiration to go search for the missing cross of Christ. She left for Jerusalem and gathered together Jewish and Christian leaders to join her in the search. They could not find the cross.

Finally, perhaps led by the Holy Spirit, they discovered near the basilica Constantine ~~had~~ <sup>was</sup> building at Golgotha a damp cave-like area which contained some wood. Helena was overjoyed until she noticed that the wood was not one cross, but three. Convinced that they had found not just the cross of Christ, but the crosses of the two thieves as well, they were faced with the task of divining which one was the true cross.

So, running into the town, they snatched up the body of a citizen who had just died and dragged it down to the pit. Then, taking up each cross in turn, they laid the wood on top of the dead body. And, lo and behold, when the third cross was lifted from the deceased, he miraculously sprang to life again, and everyone proclaimed that cross to be the true cross of Christ. They ~~dedicated the basilica~~ <sup>date was</sup> September 13, and

~~They spread the word that on the following day, people could come to and venerate the cross which would be on display in the basilica for the first time. Thus, September 14 became a day of special honor for the cross of Christ.~~

That's where the feast comes from. Now, what does it mean?

Does it strike you as odd that we choose the cross as the primary symbol for our faith? After all, the cross represents humility, the cross represents shame, the cross represents death.

Death--there's nothing we fear more, no evil more complete, no passage more thorough. Death is the ultimate winner in the game of life. It takes up every bit of what is important to us and snuffs it out like a candle. Death has all power over earthly life.

The cross should have been death's ultimate victory--the death of God. But death lost its power on the cross when Jesus rose. Jesus did not die alone on Calvary, death died on Calvary. We show the cross like a person who shows you scars after surgery. It is the symbol of victory over an immense struggle.

The meaning of this feast is that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not even death. The pain we feel in the loss of someone we love is eased only by our faith in the cross. It is this faith alone which saves us from the despair of death.

Today we honor the cross of Christ by remembering the story of Helena. Who knows if the story is true or false? It makes one important point: The cross, the instrument of death, is really the instrument of life.