

John 12:31–36
Holy Cross Day
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
September 14, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

The cross has become the paramount symbol of Christianity. There are other symbols: the fish, the anchor, the lamb. But the cross won out as the number one representation of the Christian faith. You see it on the uniforms of Christian chaplains and on the tombs of Christian soldiers. You see it on church signs and logos. It appears as the final letter on Coexist bumper stickers. The cross represents Christianity the world over, though its true meaning remains hidden from the Jews and the Gentiles. The world associates Christians with the cross because our Lord Jesus Christ died upon the cross. That's the distinctive story of Christianity, the Gospel. For the world it's just another story. But for those who believe, it is our life, our light, and our salvation. As Luther said: the cross alone is our theology. It's the only place we truly know God and His love for us.

The celebration of Holy Cross Day in the Western Church can be traced back to the early Middle Ages as a commemoration of an event hundreds of years earlier, when Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, was said to have discovered the true cross upon which Jesus was crucified. For both Helena and Constantine, the cross was everything. According to legend, at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in the year 312, Emperor Constantine “said he saw with his own eyes up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, ‘By this conquer’” (Eusebius). That same night, Constantine had a dream: “the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had

appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as a protection against the attacks of the enemy.” After winning the battle and thus securing his position as emperor, Constantine then legalized Christianity the following year with the Edict of Milan in AD 313. After hundreds of years of state-sponsored persecution, it now seemed as though the world had gone after Jesus (John 12:19). Christianity was later not only legalized, but actually made the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Thirteen years later, Emperor Constantine’s mother, Helena, went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to collect relics and establish churches at sites connected with Jesus. Tourism is older than most people know. It’s said that Helena discovered the true cross upon which Christ died. The church of the Holy Sepulchre was later built over the site and the true cross was divided between Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome. That’s what turned into the celebration of Holy Cross Day on September 14th. It started as a celebration of discovering a relic, but was retained in the Lutheran Church because of the symbolism of that relic.

On Holy Cross day, we focus upon the cross, which alone is our theology. And we focus on the cross not for the sake of the cross as some kind of museum piece, but for the sake of the one who was nailed to that cross. Without Jesus, the cross is just another instrument of torture and death, like a guillotine or a gallows. But the Word of God sanctifies all things. Because the God-man, Jesus, died on the cross for the sins of the world, the cross meant for torture and death becomes for us a sign of joy and new life, a sign of hope. The cross of Christ means everything because that’s where your sins were paid for. It’s no wonder the resurrected Jesus later appears to the disciples with the nail holes still in His hands and feet and the gash in His side. In Jesus, the marks of death become the signs of resurrection and eternal life. That’s how Jesus transforms the cross as well. The cross is no longer a sign of suffering and death, but a sign of the end of

suffering and death. When Constantine asked the Christian clergy about his vision, they said “that the sign which has appeared was the symbol of immortality, and the trophy of that victory over death which He [Jesus] had gained in time past when sojourning on earth.” In Jesus, the instrument of mortality, the means of death, becomes the instrument of immortality, the means to Resurrection and the life everlasting.

In the Gospel text for Holy Cross day from John 12, Jesus speaks to the crowds who were gathered when some Greeks came and sought out Jesus. The Father spoke from Heaven, but the crowd didn’t understand. Then Jesus says: “Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.” A new age was dawning, when the unbelieving world would be condemned, lost in their sins. And the ruler of the unbelieving world, the Devil, would be cast down from his place in Heaven, cast out of the hearts, minds, and consciences of those who believe, with no more ability to accuse them.

Jesus then says how this judgment of the world and casting out of Satan would happen: by the death of the Son of God on the cross. Jesus says: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” John adds: “He said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die.” The crowd understood Jesus was speaking about His death, because they knew the Christ, the anointed Messiah, was supposed to reign forever. So now the crowd is confused. How can the Son of Man be lifted up? How can the Son of Man be nailed to a cross? Who is this Son of Man?”

The people knew about the Son of Man prophesied in Daniel chapter 8[:13–14]: “I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and He came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him; His

dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His Kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” The crowd understood that the Son of Man would have a glorious, everlasting kingdom over all nations. But they did not understand that the Kingdom would come through suffering and the cross.

As the crowds then, so the crowds now. So few understand that the Kingdom of God comes through suffering and the cross. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1: “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 . . . Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Upon the cross, Jesus draws all people, all nations to Himself. But some turn away in derision. They scoff at and they mock the means God uses for salvation. They see nothing but a naked criminal suffering an unfortunate execution. The eyes of faith, however, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Believers see not only the perfect sacrifice upon His altar; they also see their risen King, reigning over all the earth: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, upon His throne of the cross.

Emperor Constantine’s vision was of a cross of light in the Heavens with the inscription: “Conquer by this.” You, too, are to overcome the enemy with the cross of Christ, who is the light of the world. Jesus says: “Walk while you have light, lest darkness overtake you.” Always hold the cross before your eyes and in your mind. Make the sign of the cross upon yourself. Put it above your doorposts and inscribe it upon your hearts. Let there be constant reminders to you that in His death, Jesus overcomes death for you. Let the light of the cross guide your way through the valley of the shadow of death. Let it remind you of what Jesus has done for you

when it seems He departs and hides Himself from you. Let the cross of Christ be your defense against the powers of darkness. Remember that in Holy Baptism, the cross was inscribed upon your forehead and upon your heart. You are a child of God, a soldier of Christ Jesus, marching behind the cross, the standard of your glorious King into everlasting life. In this sign, the sign of the cross, you are more than conquerors through Him who loved you. In the name of Jesus,
Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.