

Deacon Steve Moses - Homily given on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

According to legend, St. Helen found the Lord's cross on this date in the year 320.

Today's is a very old feast.¹

We have had this feast in the universal Church since not long after Helen's discovery of the "true cross."

It is good to recall that the cross we exalt is an instrument of torture and humiliation.

The Romans used crucifixion as a form of *state-sponsored terrorism and advertisement*. The message of a Roman cross was clear: Don't mess with Rome.

This may be why it is nearly impossible to find iconography of the cross in the earliest Christian art. And throughout the centuries, people have wrestled with the contradiction of this central symbol of our faith.

Yet if we take some time to consider the cross in light of our readings today, we may begin to make some sense of it.

This is one of three passages in the gospel of John that present a distinctive perspective on the crucifixion of Jesus - by speaking of it as "*lifting up*"².

It is appropriate to speak of crucifixion as "lifting up" because it does involve lifting the crucified one above the ground on the cross.

But John understands this "lifting up" as something that *only begins* with Jesus' crucifixion *and also includes* his resurrection, ascension and exaltation at God's right hand.

¹ Terrance Callan notes

² The others are John 8:28 and 12:32

John does not see the crucifixion of Jesus as a moment of humiliation that is transformed into glory by the resurrection, as Paul does³.

Rather, John interprets the crucifixion so completely in light of the resurrection that both are seen as stages in the exaltation of Jesus.

When Jesus is lifted up in this way, he returns to the Father from whom he came.

Everyone who sees him thus lifted up, and believes in him, has eternal life. God so loved the world that he sent Jesus into the world to save it in this way.

The lifting up of Jesus is comparable to Moses' lifting up of a serpent in the desert. Poisonous snakes had bitten the people of Israel.

As instructed by God, Moses made a bronze serpent, put it on a pole, and lifted it up before the people.

Everyone who looked at the bronze serpent recovered from the snakebite⁴.

In a similar way, everyone who looks at Jesus, lifted up in crucifixion and resurrection, and believes in him, will have eternal life.

So if anyone asks you just what Christians are about, exalting an instrument of torture?

Remember, first, we rejoice that something so terrible should have been transformed into a means of redemption for the whole human race.

Second, we remind ourselves of the fact that Christianity is not an abstract and spiritual

³ For example, in Philippians 2:6-11

⁴ See Nm 21:4-9

religion.

It springs from God's direct intervention in the affairs of the world, a *real* historical event involving *real* people and, in the end, a *real* execution on a *real* cross.

Finally, lest we forget, the cross we exalt belongs not just to Christ alone.

My friends, there are many crosses in the world.

All of us here today, already are carrying crosses. I know it.

We don't have to go looking for them. They find us.

And I think if we could see each other's crosses we would be humbled and in awe.

- You have denied yourself a thousand times over and have done the will of God by raising a family and all of the personal sacrifice that goes with it.
- You have gone without so that your kids could have advantages that you did not have.
- You have endured the hardships of supporting that family member or friend in his or her struggle with an addiction. You have put up with the cycle of victory and defeats, ups and downs because of the command of Jesus to love.
- Or you're dealing with that addiction yourself and digging in and trying to walk the straight line.
- You are a teenager and you are determined to live a life of virtue and chastity when it seems to you that no one else is. And you think you may pay a price for that. You will sacrifice popularity and hanging with the crowd that calls themselves cool.

- You have devoted what seems to be your life to caring for that physically or mentally challenged child or infirm, elderly parent because it is simply the right thing to do and you do it out of love.
- You have lost a child or your spouse and not a day goes by that you do not think of that person you have lost, but you find the strength to stand up and carry on and continue being a giving person when you feel that everything in life has been taken from you.
- You have worked for the same company for a long time and now you are jobless.
- You have carried around a hurt so deep and so stinging for years and even decades and you have never spoken about it to another soul and there have been times that you have wanted to act out in anger and revenge and rage, but you have resisted and turned the other cheek and responded with love.

How will your stories end? Where will carrying *your* cross lead you?

Maybe through more suffering. Maybe to death.

But I know how this story ends (pointing to the cross).

Suffering is conquered by joy.

Death is conquered by life.

Darkness is conquered by light.

Crucifixion is conquered by resurrection.

Our faith tells us that despite our suffering and sacrifices our stories will end the same way if we pick up our own crosses and follow Jesus.

Jesus gave us the Eucharist to help us accept him on *his* terms. This enables us to journey together as disciples.

On this feast, let us exalt the cross of Christ together and not deny our own.

Take up YOUR CROSS and follow Jesus for in losing your life in Jesus you will find it.