

John 12:20-33
“Sir, We Wish to See Jesus”
Holy Cross Day

September 14, 2025
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Now among those who went to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus’” (John 12:20-21).

Today, the one holy Christian and apostolic Church observes Holy Cross Day. What is Holy Cross Day? What is the origin of Holy Cross Day? Why are *we* observing Holy Cross Day?

Well, it is not very often that we can observe a church festival day and speak with certainty as to the precise origin of that observance. Today, is one of those days.

Holy Cross Day commemorates what was considered the discovery of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was in the early fourth century when Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, discovered some pieces of wood that she believed was originally a cross. And she believed it to be the cross of Christ when it effected a miraculous healing.

In time, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem was constructed on the site where this cross was found. The building was dedicated on September 13, 335, but it wasn't until that next day, September 14, when the Holy Cross was exposed for public veneration for the first time. Hence the festival of the Holy Cross, or Holy Cross Day.

Wait. What? This sounds too Roman Catholic! Miracles and veneration? Didn't Martin Luther say he was no fan of feasts dedicated to superstitions and relics? Yes, he even once said, *“If all the alleged pieces of the true cross were gathered together, dozens of crosses could be constructed from them!”* So, why are *we* observing Holy Cross Day?

Well, just look around you. The cross is a hugely significant part of Christianity. The cross is our symbol. When you see a cross, you think of Jesus, you think of Christianity, you think of Christians. The cross is *our* symbol. The cross is something that *we* connect with. The cross is very important to us.

Today, the cross is everywhere. It's jewelry. It's art. We hang crosses on our walls. Just look around and count all the crosses at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church: we have a lit cross hanging behind the altar; an altar cross; a processional cross; we have banners with crosses. Just to name a handful of places.

The cross is certainly significant. The cross is *our* symbol. But let us not forget what the cross was really about. The cross was a means of capital punishment. And often, we forget that. We wear the cross as beautiful jewelry. We make the cross look so beautiful at Easter. But the cross wasn't meant to look beautiful. The cross was the place of brutality. The cross was a means of capital punishment. If Jesus would have died by electrocution on the electric chair, we would not be processing with a cross, but an electric chair. The same is true about a noose, or if Jesus was killed by firing squad or lethal injection. So, we cannot forget that the cross was a means of capital punishment.

Jesus could have been put to death in so many other ways, but instead He chose to endure one of the worst brutal ways to die by crucifixion upon a holy cross that wasn't holy in itself. The cross only became holy because Jesus sanctified it through His shed blood.

So, why do we, as Lutherans, observe Holy Cross Day? Well, it's not to observe a relic attested by miracles. Rather, we celebrate Holy Cross Day because of the triumph of our Lord upon the real cross that once stood on Golgotha. There, Christ's blood blotted out the sin of the world. There, His death proved death's destruction. We observe Holy Cross Day because of the way the triune God used and uses suffering to bring blessing. We observe this day, because of the way He worked and works so contrary to anything human reason could or would ever conceive or anticipate.

We observe this day, because with the Greeks in today's Gospel lesson, we, too, "*Wish to see Jesus*" (John 12:21).

As it was custom, thousands of people would ascend to Jerusalem each year to celebrate the Passover Festival. Yet, this year, was a little different as many in the crowd came for an additional reason. They came to see Jesus. You see, the word was spreading that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The crowd took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him crying out, "*Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!*" (John 12:13).

Now among those who went up to worship at the Passover Feast were some Greeks who came up to Philip and said to him, ***“Sir, we wish to see Jesus”*** (John 12:21). These Greeks were strange fellows to come to this feast. They were Gentiles, not Jews. And it is odd that these men went to Philip and not straight to Jesus. We don’t know why, but it could be that they felt comfortable with Philip, because “Philip” was a Greek name. So, why were these Greek men there? Our Epistle has some clues. The Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write: ***“For the Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom”*** (1 Corinthians 1:22). They were likely seeking wisdom.

You and I have also come to see Jesus. And we are not too different from the Jews and Greeks of two thousand years ago. We also demand signs and seek wisdom. We wish Jesus would cure us of our health issues of body and mind. We wish Jesus would multiply our bread, our money, so that we would not have to worry. We wish Jesus would cast out our demons of fear and anxiety. We wish Jesus would pull our loved ones out of their slumber of unbelief. We wish to see Jesus. But we also demand signs. So, where is the sign?

You and I have come to see Jesus. But we also seek wisdom. We wish to hear from a great teacher. We wish to learn some short, pithy sayings, so we would have the words to say when people ask us about our faith, the one true Christian faith. We wish we could always have every answer to the doubts that arise in our own hearts. We wish we could have the wisdom to combat the fallen world around us. We are like the Greeks. We wish to see Jesus. We want to behold God’s glory in wisdom.

To our demands of signs and wisdom, God says, ***“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart”*** (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).

God says the word of the cross is certainly folly to those who are perishing.

Like the Jews and the Greeks of yesteryear, we don’t get what we expect. We likely won’t see any great sign. Our health issues may not miraculously go away. You may not receive a miraculous feeding or receive money out of thin air. We still struggle.

But we get to see Jesus. So, what did Jesus say to the request of these Greeks? He said, ***“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified”*** (John 12:23). He said, ***“You Jews and you Greeks demand signs and wisdom, but I will show you the power of God and the wisdom of God.”***

For the worldly wise, the cross is utter foolishness. People, by their nature, expect something else from what God offers them. Jews demand miraculous signs. They say, ***“Show us a sign!”*** (Matthew 12:38).

Jesus, indeed, gave them signs. He healed the sick; He opened the eyes of the blind; He raised the dead; He preached good news to the poor in spirit. But they wanted a different sign.

The Greeks demand wisdom. God still frustrates human wisdom. The greatest scholars today will never find God or understand Him if he depends on his own intellect. God has said so. Again, ***“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart”*** (1 Corinthians 1:19). By means of this stumbling block, God brings salvation. By the powerful means of the word of the cross – the theology of the cross, Jesus says, ***“When I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all people to Myself”*** (John 12:32).

There, hanging on the cross, Jesus calls us to forsake the glory you think you have. He calls you to abandon the glory of human wisdom, logic, and reason. Instead, He calls you to Himself, because there on the cross He puts to shame all the glory of this fallen world, including all it’s *“supposed”* strength and it’s *“supposed”* wisdom. There, on the cross, He gave us the only way to salvation. And *that* is the significance of the cross. There is no other way to salvation without Christ’s atoning death on that holy cross where He put an end to eternal death by the means of which He gives us forgiveness, life, and salvation. There, Jesus won for you what all the strength of this fallen world could never ever muster. There, He accomplished for you what the wisdom of this fallen world could *never* fathom: the forgiveness of your sins.

Now, as Lutherans we cannot deny the possibility that the cross of Christ was discovered by Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine. The same is true about the Shroud of Turin, which is a linen cloth that bears the image of a crucified man that many believe to be that of Jesus Christ Himself. I am even inclined to believe that the Shroud of Turin is Christ’s burial cloth. Could they both be real – the Holy Cross and Shroud? Possibly.

But for us, whether those relics are authentic or not is *not* of prime importance. What does matter is that Jesus was ***“lifted up”*** just as He said. And that through His act of divine love, He still draws all people to Himself through the redemption that is in His blood, the forgiveness of our sins according to the riches of His grace.

And better than any relic is the real presence of Jesus, who suffered, died, rose and ascended, who we receive by faith under simple bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, which forgives our sins and strengthens our faith.

So, we observe Holy Cross Day because we want to see Jesus, because it is by His wounds that we have been healed. Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +