

9-27-2019 Exaltation of the Cross
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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Why are we here? I know you all know because I already told you. It is so important, and I do this fairly often to exhort you to stop and ask, why am I here? Why am I here? Particularly on this day, seeing the things that I am seeing the priest doing, the things that they are doing. Why? Why?

I mentioned recently in a homily that one of the main reasons that we need to know why we do the things that we do and so that we can share our faith. Like the Theotokos, whose nativity we celebrated recently, we can come today on the day of the Exaltation of the Cross or the Elevation of the Cross, and we can be moved in our hearts with great love for the cross and for the sacrifice that Christ made for us as our Savior. We can intuitively know that it is right to venerate the cross, to make the sign of the cross, to bring the cross into our lives. But the minute that somebody asks us why? Why? And why are you here? Why are you bowing down before the cross? Are you worshipping it? Is it an idol? Why does the priest go up and down lifting the cross? Is it just for beauty? Is it just for entertainment somehow or show? Is this all choreography? We have to know the answer to those questions.

Another reason why we need to know the why is because it deepens our faith. It keeps us from becoming Orthodox Christians in form alone or in habit alone. And instead, we are Orthodox Christians by intent, by decision. We have made the decision as Christ exhorts us to, to follow him, to be like him, to imitate him, to go where he has gone, to be his disciples. And in order to do that, we have to deny ourselves. That takes coming to a place of knowing what the self is so that it can be denied. It's not my personhood, it's not my authentic identity in the eyes of God who created me. What is that self that has to be denied? We have to take up our cross. We have to participate in our own crucifixion to some degree. Well, what is that going to be? What form is it going to take? And we have to go after him. Go after Christ.

In some translations it says if you want to follow me and others it says, if you want to come after me. I love "come after me." We are all following Christ, but we are coming after him in that historically we are coming after him. He came before us, we come afterwards. We are also going after him in the sense that we are walking the path that he has walked. We're also going after him because we're not satisfied with what this life can give us, we want Christ. We want him in our life. We want to know him. Well, we want him to be dwelling in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We want to go after him the way that we go after things that we love and desire.

And on this day particularly, it's interesting that we read in the Gospel the history of the crucifixion itself. Often on Feast of the Cross, we'll be exhorted with the line if you want to come after me, to follow me, deny yourself, pick up your cross and follow me. But on this day, we are emphasizing the reality of the cross itself in our midst. We hear the Gospel account because we want to be reminded that the soldiers who crucified Christ actually went and got pieces of wood and they made a cross out of them, and they nailed our Savior to that cross. And after he had given up the spirit, he was taken down from that cross. We see that series of events here in the icons in the center above the three holy doors, Christ ascending the cross and being nailed to it, the crucifixion in the middle and then over here above the holy doors on the St. John alter, the taking down of the cross. All events

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that we remember. And then there is this mystery that what Christ touches, what he communes with, what is a part of his life and his existence as the Savior becomes holy itself. In the Prokeimenon this morning, we sang “worship at His footstool for He is Holy.” In other translations, it says, “worship at His footstool, for it is Holy.” That His footstool is holy. And I remember talking to people thinking, well, that's strange. If Christ is there himself and his feet are on the footstool, why are we worshiping the footstool as holy if Christ is there himself?

Because the footstool is the cross. The footstool is that thing which he chose to use as part of his salvific ministry for us and our personal salvation. And in the first 300 years roughly of Christianity, there are Christians being persecuted for about 250 years out of that 300 after the destruction of Jerusalem, they've been hiding in the catacombs, many, many, many, many martyrs. Thousands of martyrs, tens of thousands of martyrs. And by the grace of God, finally, Constantine comes along and he defeats the other emperors and unites the empire and becomes a Christian himself because Christ spoke to him and told him that if he conquered in the name of Christ, that he would be victorious. And he was. His father was a pagan, his mother was a Christian. He embraces Christianity in 312, 300 years, 312 years after Christ is born, Christians are acknowledged and they are allowed to worship freely without persecution, without imprisonment, without death.

And as the church is celebrating this incredible freedom that they really have never had before in the first century roughly, they are persecuted by the Jews and others, in the second and third century, they are persecuted by the Roman government. So now they have this incredible freedom. In Rome itself, Constantine builds five gigantic churches with his own money to begin the restoration of the church. To bring the church up from being underground, a catacomb church. And in their zeal, Constantine tells his mother, Helen, go back to Jerusalem and find the holy places and restore them. Because in 70 AD, Jerusalem had been completely destroyed, completely destroyed. Raised to the ground, not one stone on top of another.

And Helen takes, I think it's about 300 workers and soldiers with her and they travel by boat to Jerusalem and they go to the holy places, and the people there, you have to remember there have always been Christians in Jerusalem no matter what is going on. No matter when the Crusaders came, no matter when the Muslims took over at different times, the Christians were always there, and they didn't forget where the events of Christ happened. I told the kids this week in catechism that if the bad guys came and destroyed our church and burned it to the ground, there would still be this odd square of concrete and rubble and we would know that this is where our church was. We weren't allowed to rebuild it, we would tell our children and they would tell their children. It'd be very easy to keep these kinds of facts in the oral tradition of the church.

That's something that people don't like to accept these days. If it doesn't come printed digitally, they don't believe it. But the world relied on oral tradition in the past. It was literally the means by which you preserve knowledge, and everyone had a better memory than we have. That's a different topic. So, in their zeal, he tells his mother, take all of the soldiers and workers, go back to Jerusalem and find the holy places. They arrive there, they start traveling around Jerusalem and it's actually very easy to figure out where the temple used to be. They find Christ tomb because Christ tomb is a tomb

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carved out of stone and is not a building. It's literally a chunk of rock with a hole in it where he was buried.

They find the tomb of the Theotokos for it as well is in this low cave, which is still there in Jerusalem today. They know where Golgotha is, where the crucifixion took place, and they know where the cross is. Not just the cross of Christ, not just the crosses of the thieves that were crucified with him, but everywhere they would discard the wood of the cross, which was considered a cursed wood, an evil wood by the people, they just threw it down this hill next to where they crucified the people. And over time, it was like a rubbish pile. And over time, it gets covered with garbage and it gets covered with dirt, but eventually basil starts growing there. The plant basil means king, the plant of the king growing over the place where the cross of the King is. The footstool of the King that is holy.

And the local people know that for a long time, basil grew in this place. Eventually the Romans, after the destruction of Jerusalem, built a temple, I think to Athena, over the spot. And so, Helen comes here with her workers, she tears down the temple, she excavates the dirt and they get down there. They get down to where the cross is. I've been to the place where the cross was found and it's down low. It's off the side of a cliff really. And they find their multiple crosses. It's a dilemma. Now you have to put yourself into their shoes. At this time, they don't know that the cross is going to work miracles. They don't know that. They love Christ; therefore they want the things that he touched that were a part of his ministry, a part of his death and resurrection for us.

They wanted to know where his body was laid. And it came to their mind that, "Well, let's find the cross as well." And they start excavating, they start digging and lo and behold, they find multiple crosses. And we know from the history of the lives of the saints and the events in the church that the cross is found, the true cross of Christ is found because when people start touching it, they are healed. When they take the cross, the patriarch takes across and he puts it onto the dead corpse being carried in a funeral procession by the excavation site, the dead man comes back to life. And they realize that this is the cross itself. And the patriarch knowing now which cross belongs to Christ because it is working miracles in front of their eyes, he lifts it high up into the air as we see on the icon, and the people call out, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy.

And so we are here today with the priests battling low down to where the cross is found, discarded, low, thought of as nothing, and it is discovered and it is raised up and before the people and the people cry out, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy because it has dawned on them now that not only Christ himself, not only the martyrs that followed him with their lives, but even the wood that held him suspended in the air is life-giving. He touched it, he sanctified it, it is holy. If you think about it for a minute, the zeal of the church is so much that what do we have on the top of our buildings? We don't have pictures of Christ, we don't have pictures of his tomb, we don't have symbols of his ascension into heaven or a sitting at the right hand of the Father.

We don't have signs of the Holy Spirit descending on Pentecost. We don't have symbols of loaves and fish that he multiplied for the people. We have the cross. That is how important it is compared to all of those other things. We make the sign of the cross on our bodies, not some other symbol. We use

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the cross to sanctify everything in our life to drive away the demons. It was amazing last night in Vespers and in Matins, we sang over and over again, the cross is a gift to the people. The cross is a gift to the people. The cross is a gift. It's a gift to you. And what are we supposed to do with it? The other half of all those statements was terrify the demons, drive the demons away, crush the demons under our feet.

We're supposed to be wielding that cross. We don't make the cross out of fear, we make the cross out of victory knowing that Christ is already victorious, and we are participating in that victory through his cross. And it doesn't make sense to the world as Saint Paul said to the Corinthians this morning that the cross is foolishness to the world. It doesn't make sense at all. How could something a vehicle of death be holy? How could just moving, waving your hands mystically somehow across your body bring power into your life? How can a King who failed and died, was defeated, be glorious? It doesn't make sense to the world at all. And yet when we voluntarily not only honor his cross and make the sign of the cross, when we pick up our cross, having denied ourselves that self that is egotistical, that self that thinks it's already God, it's not our true self, it's our false self that we're denying. And we pick up the cross, we embrace all the hardship that comes into our life because Christ did. There is no other reason why we endure hardship. Hardship stinks.

Nobody enjoys it. Christ was on his knees in the garden of Gethsemane asking his Father to let the crucifixion not have to happen. "Let this cup pass from me." And he sweated blood in anticipation of his death, his voluntary death. But he has to do it anyways. For he prays also, not my will, but your will be done. And when we embrace those crosses in our life, one of the things that we encounter is that it's actually not as scary as we thought it was going to be. The anticipation is way worse than the battle itself. And we get into it and we start enjoying it and we start loving it, we start realizing it's making us tough. We start realizing that I'm a more stable and hopeful and patient and calm person than all of these people around me in the world because they're all suffering from the anxiety of death looming in their life, their mortality before them. They do not like the discomfort of the struggle of day to day life. We see that bumper sticker, life is a B word, and then you die.

Life's a cross and we will die. But in Christ, all of that suffering, all of that difficulty, and it's not that we like to suffer. Please don't ever say you like to suffer, but we're willing to suffer. A hero doesn't want to take the risk, he takes the risk anyways for the wellbeing of the people that he is saving. We don't want to suffer. We're looking forward to a time in heaven when there is no suffering. It is all taken away. We are longing for that. But in the meantime, we are going to sweat when we plow the ground. We are going to be in pain, both of body and of heart, as we go through this life and the difficulties that it gives us and the disappointments that come along, but we are going to endure anyways for we picked up our cross and we are following Christ and imitating him.

We are going to do what he calls us to do because we want to be like him. And so, on this day in particular, we remember particularly the finding of the Holy cross. We do not want to forget that there was a time when the cross was not in the midst of the church. There was a time when the church decided it was important enough to go find. And when they found it, it brought incredible blessings into the church. And we realize that sanctity of Christ sanctifies everything that he involves in his salvific plan for us. And we have the special blessing now by the grace of the Jerusalem

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Patriarchate through Bishop Damaskinos and through his Archimandrite Damaskinos, that we have a relic now of the cross of Christ. It's a tiny one, tiny, but it's the real thing. Seventeen hundred years ago, it was in the ground in Jerusalem and St. Helen and her workers dug it up.

It was carried around the world venerated by people everywhere as it was broken into smaller and smaller pieces so that more and more people could be blessed with its presence. And a tiny piece of it has made its way to St. Lawrence Church and Felton, California. Is that not alone a miracle? Is that not alone a miracle? So at the end, we will venerate the cross in the middle with basil and the roses, the beautiful cross that we decorate, and then at the foot of the ambo, we will have, in a very humble reliquary, we'll get a better one over time, but a tiny piece of the actual cross of Christ. Make it real again in your lives. Don't let this history be a story that you've heard and are familiar with. Let it be a part of reality that you are participating in.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.