

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible and place a lighted candle and crucifix beside it. Describe or display crosses that speak to you about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection and your Christian lives.

LEADER: The tree of Jesus' death becomes a tree of life.

ALL: At Jesus' name every knee should bend.

LEADER: Let us name people who suffer crucifixion today. *Pause to do this.*

ALL: We lament the suffering in our world. May God's word generate new ways to heal and give life to those who suffer among us. Amen.

The cross, an instrument of state execution, symbolizes our Christian faith that Jesus' death and resurrection open to us a new life. On Good Friday Christians venerate the cross—touch it, kiss it, kneel before it. “This is the wood of the cross, on which hung the savior of the world,” the celebrant intones as he uncovers the symbol of Jesus' death, one arm at a time.

The wood of the cross symbolizes our salvation. In Jesus, God becomes one of us and by his incarnation unites himself with every human. “He worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will, and loved with a human heart,” says the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (#22).

Minnie came from a singing family and usually instigated the singing at parties, funerals, and weddings. For her own funeral she chose hymns whose lyrics she had lived and that expressed her understanding of her life. At the wake her youngest daughter sang, “Love Lifted Me,” the favorite of Minnie's last days, an image that flows from the gospel of this feast of the cross. With a hand on the coffin she sang a *cappella* as she had been singing for her mom at home— “When I was down and out, love lifted me.”

Another singer and I sang “Hail Mary: Gentle Woman,” which expressed the value Minnie placed on Mary's motherhood and her own. At the preparation of the gifts at Mass, we sang the altar call familiar from Billy Graham's television crusades, which ends, “Just as I am, I come, I come.” In these lyrics Minnie brought to the altar all that she had to give.

At the cemetery we sang, “The Old Rugged Cross.” Minnie found in the last line of its chorus a statement that made sense of her suffering. “I'll turn in my cross for a crown.” Her songs trace how she identifies her suffering with Jesus' suffering in firm Christian hope that resurrection follows.

● What sorrow in your life is like Jesus' suffering?



Minnie Jensen, a friend, died at 50, having battled cancer for almost 20 of her years, including a radiation burn from early treatment that never healed. She married at 16 without finishing high school. The youngest of her six children was two when she first had surgery for breast cancer. Wanting to see her children grow up kept Minnie struggling to live.

GOSPEL

Jesus reveals God's love for us.

NARRATOR: Jesus spoke to Nicodemus.

JESUS 1: No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

JESUS 2: Yes, God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son that whoever believes in him may not perish but may



have eternal life. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

John 3.13-17

What does the cross celebrate?

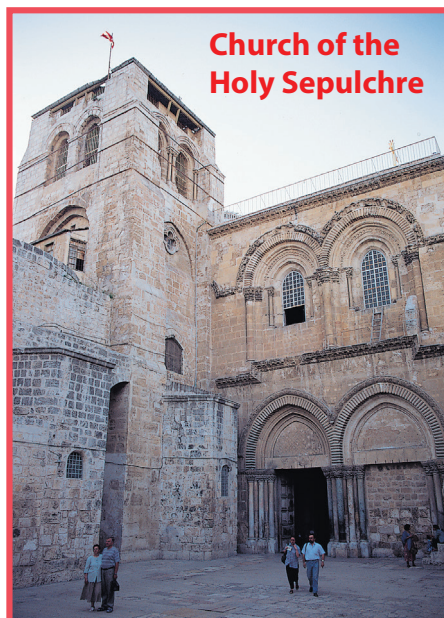
The Triumph of the Cross is an important feast of the Eastern Church because it celebrates the dedication in AD 335 of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This church rises above two of Christendom's holiest sites— Golgatha, the place of Jesus' crucifixion, and his tomb. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, built this church.

For centuries pilgrims have gathered at this church in Holy Week. In fact, the Holy Week liturgies evolve from the way Christians celebrated Jesus' resurrection every Sunday and during Holy Week visited the sites of his last supper, trial, and death.

The church is old; the doorway and approach humble. Inside the door is an altar

built over the rock formation where the Romans crucified insurrectionists. In Jesus' time this place was outside the city gates to the west.

As a Minnesotan, I always imagined that the Roman soldiers dug a post hole for



Jesus' cross the way we did to raise telephone poles and plant fence posts. But in the rocky land of Israel the soldiers chipped permanent holes in the limestone in which they could stand the poles for crucifixion. One of these holes is beneath the altar.

Greek Orthodox Christians maintain this altar. To honor Jesus' death place, they hang lamps and keep them lit.

Just a few yards away is the site of Jesus' tomb, a place with a miniature cathedral-like structure above. Huge lamps also surround the tomb. In addition, pilgrims can light small candles and place them in stands or boxes of sand. Only four or five people fit inside the tomb at a time. Pilgrims from many lands grace the place with their faith, their prayers and tears.

Visiting the Holy Sepulchre stirred my emotions much as visiting our family cemetery does or visiting the Gettysburg battlefield. When my brother, sisters, and I decorate our family graves, we remember Grandma Mitchell's directions about how to do it. We clip and mow as Dad had us do in the years after mother died. The veil between generations grows thin.

At Gettysburg one circles the open fields across which soldiers charged one another in three days of bloody battles. The park provides a radio tour. Visitors drive from point to point to explore how the battle unfolded. The 1st Minnesota turned the tide on the third day, 300 men charging across the field with bayoneted muskets but no cover. Most died. I felt

awe at the human cost of ending slavery.

The church we celebrate this feast day makes real, as places can, Jesus' death and resurrection. To this day Christians carry crosses through the narrow streets of the Old City, making the Stations of the Cross. Venerating the cross as we do in the Good Friday liturgy imitates the pilgrimage Christians make to Golgatha, remembering and honoring Jesus loving us, even unto death on the cross.

- What is your experience of visiting memorial sites?
- Invite anyone who has visited the Holy Sepulchre to share his or her experiences.
- What effect might it have to play the part of Jesus in a mystery play or in the public Way of the Cross in San Antonio on Good Friday?



Written late in the first century, 60 to 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, John's gospel includes more theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus' life than any other gospel. Both John's gospel and the hymn from Philippians 2, that is Sunday's second reading, understand the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection as a descent and ascent. John's gospel calls the hour of Jesus' arrest, betrayal, and death the hour of his glorification. It does not see Jesus' death as a separate event but understands his death, resurrection, and ascension all as moments in his one act of returning to God.

Sunday's gospel refers to Jesus' crucifixion as a "lifting up." In John 12.32, Jesus speaks of his impending hour and says, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." He said this to show by what death he was to die."

Being *lifted up* condenses within a single verb the whole paschal mystery—Jesus' crucifixion and death, his resurrection and return to God. Ironically, the lifting up to put Jesus to death has just the opposite effect; it lifts him and us to new life—to life with God.

● What do you value about lifting up as an image of the entire Easter mystery?

The first Christians mined the scriptures of Israel—the Old Testament—to reflect on Jesus' death and resurrection. Sunday's gospel draws on a passage from the Old Testament book of Numbers in which Moses forms a bronze serpent to save the people from poisonous snake bite during their wilderness sojourn. The gospel finds a parallel between Moses lifting up the bronze serpent and Jesus' lifting up to save us—"So must the Son of Man be lifted up."

This verse and other references to "lifting up" function much like Jesus' passion predictions in the synoptic gospels. They foreshadow what will happen in the narrative.

For many John 3.16 summarizes the entire gospel. Indeed it does. We often see the citation on signs at sports events. By itself, however, John 3.16 can make God seem like an abusive

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Participate in work for immigration reform. Advocates for comprehensive immigration reform describe the way of immigrants north from Central America through Mexico to U.S. borders as a way of the cross.
- Learn about the activity of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Migration. In April some 20 bishops, including Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston, joined bishops from states along the Mexican/United States border to investigate conditions and celebrate Mass for the nearly 6,000 migrants who have died in the U.S. desert. Visit usccb.org/about/migration-policy or search for Bishops on the Border: Mission for Migrants.

parent foreordaining that Jesus must die as a sacrifice.

The word *must* can make Jesus' death seem a necessity, rather than a violent state execution. For John Jesus is not only the post-Easter risen Lord but the pre-existent, divine Word, who knows ahead of time what will happen. But Jesus is always both human and divine. His life and not only his death and resurrection reveal God's love. In Jesus, God dwells with us, walks with us. Jesus calls his disciples friends. In him, we become friends of God. He incarnates God's compassion and love for us and calls us to incarnate God's compassion and love for one another.

Jesus saves us by showing us how to love one another. We can listen to one another's stories, share one another's hurts, lift one another's spirits.

Christians believe new life is possible; Easter happens many times a day in our listening, laughing, forgiving, sharing together. Jesus makes us whole by opening to us what life in God is.

The risen Jesus lives and saves us in our love for one another. Brian Wren's Easter hymn "Christ is Alive" captures how:

*Christ is alive, let Christians sing.
His cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring.
His love in death shall never die.*

*Christ is alive his Spirit burns
through this and every future age,
till all creation lives and learns
his joy, his justice, love and praise.*

Worship Hymnal, # 466

- How do you continue the love of God and God's Son for the world?
- How do you give and share the new life of Easter?



Israel complains.

The people of Israel are murmuring in Sunday's first reading. Bad food. No water. But conditions grow even worse as the people, once slaves in Egypt, wander in the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula.

The narrative tells us that God sent snakes that bit the people. Their murmuring literally turns poisonous and deadly.

The snake bites shape the people up. Moses prays for help, and God instructs him to make a serpent. Moses makes a bronze serpent that works somewhat like a vaccine. A look at the bronze serpent cures snake bite, just as a little bit of an illness in a vaccine raises necessary immunities to the disease. Christians see in the bronze serpent a type of Jesus.

The bronze serpent.

The people became impatient on the journey. They spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness where there is no food and water? We detest this miserable food!"

Then the Holy One sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the Holy One and against you; pray to the Holy One to take the serpents away from us."

So Moses prayed for the people, and the Holy One said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole. Everyone who is bitten will look at it and live."

Moses made the serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole. Whenever a serpent bit someone that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Numbers 21.4-9

- What do you find poisonous about complaining?
- How does looking at a crucifix in your home, workplace, or church help you live your Christian life?

PRAY

LEADER: Jesus invites us to be friends of God, who live in friendship with God and one another.

ALL: Let us share one another's burdens and joys.

LEADER: Let us live Easter every day.

ALL: You sweep us into the joy of welcoming friends who share your delight in each of us.

LEADER: May our love give life as Jesus' love gives life. Amen.



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