Let’s talk a little today about the cross. This amazing symbol of hope that we see it as today- was not very hopeful at all prior to Christs resurrection. Before Jesus was crucified, the cross was a symbol of suffering and shame. After Jesus’ resurrection, the Disciples and the whole world came to see and understand the cross in a whole new way. It became a symbol of hope, new life, and victory. But before we get to that hope… we have to look at it for what it was.

Bible commentator, William Barclay described an event that took place early in young Jesus’ life, when Jesus was somewhere around the age of 10 or 11. This would have been maybe a year or two before Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple. A man considered a zealot by the name of Judas the Galilean led a rebellion against Rome. He raided the Roman armory at Sepphoris, which is said to be Mary’s hometown, and only four miles from Nazareth where Jesus grew up. As might have been expected, the Romans were swift and very violent with their vengeance. Sepphoris was burned to the ground and its inhabitants were sold into slavery. Two thousand rebels - about the population of Sheffield- were crucified on crosses which were set in a line along one of the main roads as a warning to anyone who might have been thinking of following the example of these poor fellows. It sent a pretty clear message … don’t mess with Rome! Although it isn’t a great picture imagine walking along the road… seeing two thousand bodies hung on crosses. Crosses were used as a tool of punishment Not of hope.

The cross was a symbol of deep shame and great pain to both Jews and Gentiles. To the Jews, it was the worst form of humiliation possible. Under the laws they followed it stated, “… anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (Deuteronomy 21:23). A century before Jesus hung on a cross, the famous Roman senator and philosopher Cicero wrote this about the cross: “It is the most cruel and shameful of all punishments. Let it never come near the body of a Roman citizen.”

On Good Friday we read from John and heard his description of the crucifixion, like the other three Gospels, John doesn’t give us a lot of detail.

“So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by Himself, He went out to what is called ‘The Place of the Skull,’ There,” says John, they crucified Him … and with Him two others … one on either side ..with Jesus between them.” (John 19:17-18).

As Cicero said, crucifixion was a cruel and horrible way to die. It was and is one of the most torturous forms of execution ever devised. After a brutal scourging or beating … which most did not survive … the victim was forced to carry his own crossbeam to the site of execution … a distance of about a mile. A man would walk ahead of the condemned person carrying a placard on which were written the charges that had brought this poor wretch to such a ghastly and deplorable condition. This placard, which would be nailed to the convict’s cross once they reached the place of execution, served as a solemn warning to others not to commit the same crime or crimes.

John says that Jesus carried His own cross … and although we see it depicted as the whole cross it was probably only the crossbeam. The upright portion would have already been in the ground waiting for him.

The other Gospel writers report that the soldiers forced a man named Simon of Cyrene to bear Jesus’ cross. I think that Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us about Simon of Cyrene because they wanted us to know how weak Jesus was from the mistreatment and beatings that He had received. John leaves out the part of Simon of Cyrene probably because he wants us to focus on the fact that Jesus alone carried the burden of our sin all the way to the rest of the cross that was waiting for him. What Jesus carried on His shoulders that day weighed a whole lot more than just a wooden crossbeam

When they reached “The Place of the Skull,” they made Him lie down with his arms resting on the crossbeam, where they proceeded to nail Him to it.. His two feet were forced together and nailed to the cross with a single nail … and then everyone stood around and watched Him die. Punishment and no hope.

In Jesus’ day, the image of the cross was associated with Roman oppression. The cross was a sign of the worst torture one could possibly suffer. It was a symbol of shame and humiliation. Hard to imagine that today- but at that time in that moment that is what everyone saw when they saw the cross.

…and despite that, Jesus willingly accepted the cross. He chose to die a condemned criminal’s death. He accepted the humiliation … the ridicule and hate … the pain and suffering that came with dying on the cross.

And when he did that…. And I don’t know about you but I can already feel the swelling of the next chapter inside of me.

… when He took on what dying on the cross meant- something amazing happened. He changed the cross from a symbol of Roman authority to divine mercy. He changed the cross from a symbol of death and hopelessness into a symbol of eternal life … and hope … eternal hope.

What do we think … what do we picture … when we see the cross today? Why do we place the cross in our churches? Why do we place them on top of our churches for all to see? Why do we wear them around our necks? Why do we place them at gravesites? Because the cross is not only a symbol of ridicule, pain and suffering but it is also a symbol of love, sacrifice, hope, and victory!

In our scripture from Peter we read about this amazing transformation of such a gruesome symbol. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!, By His great mercy He has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading; kept in Heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1st Peter 1:3-5).

The cross reminds us of God’s love. Even when sin came into the world and messed things up, God had a plan to redeem His children. With a living hope. John 3:16 says …

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but will have eternal life.” A living Hope

Adam and Eve were sent out of paradise because of a tree, remember that? The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They ate from that forbidden tree … yet it was also a tree that opened the doors of paradise once again for all believers! Know what tree that is? The Tree of Redemption. The Tree of Salvation. The cross! A living Hope. Because of that what Jesus did on that tree … we have a hope for eternity. “Grace” is the kindness that God shows towards us in spite of our sin. We are enough because of Christ taking a cross of punishment and terror to a place that gave us grace and a living hope. Because of our total helplessness to right our wrongs, God made a way to show us mercy.

For us, the “cross” is a symbol of hope. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1st Peter 1:3-4).

Before Jesus was crucified, the cross was a symbol of suffering and shame. Immediately after His crucifixion, it became a symbol of despair and hopelessness and even deeper shame. The Disciples and His followers had abandoned Jesus. They had betrayed Him. They had denied Him. They had placed all their hope in Him … and now He was dead. For three days they lived in complete and utter hopelessness and despair.

And then, something amazing happened that changed everything … changed their lives, changed the meaning of the cross, changed the whole world. Jesus’ grave, His tomb was empty! After Jesus’ resurrection, the Disciples and the whole world came to see and understand the cross in a whole new way. It was no longer a symbol of shame and suffering. It was no longer a symbol of hopelessness and despair. It was now a sign of hope for all people. It became the symbol of new life … eternal life. Whenever we think that evil is winning in the world, all we have to do is look at the cross and we are given hope. We are reminded of the truth … that sin and death will never, ever have the last say, amen?

Peter says that the cross has not only given us hope but a special kind of hope … “living hope.” Our hope is a “living” hope because Jesus is alive. C.S. Lewis said: “Do not let your happiness depend on something you may lose … only [upon] the Beloved who will never pass away.”

Peter also says we have an inheritance that is “incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away … reserved in Heaven for … who?” For you!

Our “inheritance” is the object of our hope. How many of you hope to inherit something from one or some of your relatives? Maybe it’s a piece of land … or a house … or some money. Maybe it’s something valuable … something that’s been in your family for a long time … passed down from one generation to the next.

Abraham was promised an inheritance. In Genesis 12:7, “The Lord appeared to Abram and said: ‘To your descendants I will give this land.’” Abraham’s inheritance was the land of Canaan. Well, guess what? We have a MUCH better inheritance! Our inheritance is Heaven … and all of its blessings.

As Peter pointed out, our hope is a “living hope” because we have an inheritance that cannot be touched by human hostility, calamity, or circumstances because it is stored … or being kept … in a place where humans cannot reach it. Our hope is eternal because our inheritance is eternal. Our inheritance can never perish. Our inheritance can never spoil. Our inheritance can never fade.

How do we know that we have an inheritance that is incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away … reserved for us in Heaven? We need only look to the cross … where our inheritance was bought and paid for … and our hope springs eternal.

The cross is a symbol of hope. The cross is also a symbol of victory! Peter goes on to say that we are “being protected by the Power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1st Peter 1:5). Outside are evil forces waiting to assault us but the power of God is keeping them out and keeping us safe. Like the walls of an impenetrable fortress, God’s power surrounds us and protects us … Giving us living hope.

Our salvation is ready. It is not in the planning stages. It is not waiting to hatch and develop. Our salvation is ready. It is complete. It is finished! It was finished on the cross! Jesus’ death and resurrection secured our salvation the moment He released His Spirit.

Before Jesus’ victory on the cross, death was one of the Devil’s most powerful weapons. The fear of death … the hopelessness of death … all played into the Devil’s hands. The fear was that all who died would enter into Satan’s dark kingdom … but when Jesus died on the cross and paid for our sins, all that fear was removed.

The Roman cross, which had been a tool of pain and suffering … a tool of evil and hopelessness … became the cross of Jesus Christ. Death has been swallowed up in victory. In 1st Corinthians we read “ “Death, where is your victory? [pause] Death, where is your sting?” The cross … once a symbol of suffering and shame and death … has now become a potent reminder that Satan and death no longer have power over us. A symbol of Living Hope.

Friends- remember that our hope today is a “living” hope because we have an inheritance in Heaven … An inheritance that first turned fear and punishment into the hope that we have in our hearts everyday. and that inheritance is Jesus’ victory over evil and darkness and destruction and death. Jesus’ victory is our victory.

During these dark days of history during this Easter season and the dark days we see during our own time of uncertainty and fear, we must never forget to keep our eyes focused on the cross. We must never forget the meaning of the cross. Although everything around you may tell you to lose hope … to panic … to despair …to be fearful of tomorrow… We’ve got the cross to remind us that we have hope … but not just any hope. … we have a “living” hope.

On October 5th of 2006, the 2-ton, 20 foot high cross that a man named Frank Silecchia found in the wreckage of one of the World Trade Towers was placed on a flat bed truck and transported to St. Peter’s Cathedral three blocks away … its temporary home facing “ground zero.” It was later moved and permanently erected in front of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum.

Believe it or not … and I’m sure that most of you will … a group of atheists tried to legally prevent the girder cross from becoming a part of the memorial and museum, claiming that … they experienced “depression, headaches, anxiety, mental pain, and anguish” when they looked upon it. Depression … headaches … anxiety … mental pain … and anxiety … They also claimed that it was “a shame and an insult to every non-Christian survivor … I wonder if that is possible… to have survived something like that and still be a “non-believer”?

These atheists that tried to prevent this cross from becoming a permanent part of the September 11 memorial, did not succeed for one reason and one reason only…. Because they had no idea, no clue, about the power that’s behind the cross,

Let us pray:

Praise be to You, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

• For Your great mercy in giving us birth into new life and a new living hope by raising Jesus Christ from the Dead … Praise be to You, our God and Father.

• For an inheritance that is kept for us Heaven, an inheritance that can never spoil or fade … Praise be to You, our God and Father.

• For the protection of Your power … ours through faith … until salvation comes at the end of time … Praise be to You, our God and Father.

Father, to You be all praise and glory and honor through Jesus Christ, Your Son and our Lord … and in whose name we now pray …Amen