What is the most common religious symbol in the world? In our part of the world, the most common religious symbol is the cross. You see the cross on churches. You see the cross in jewelry. Athletes cross themselves sometimes during sporting events. What does the cross mean to you?

It wasn’t always such a popular symbol. During the days of Jesus, the cross was a symbol of shame and embarrassment, a symbol of warning and terror. The Roman empire used the cross as a means of execution. A pole would be sunk into the ground, and if you were sentenced to crucifixion, you would be fastened to a crossbar and hung onto that pole. The cross was only reserved for slaves and robbers and assassins and rebels. As a general rule, Roman citizens wouldn’t be executed on a cross, because it was too shameful of a way to die.

The cross was a common site in the early first century. Caesar Augustus bragged about capturing 20,000 runaway slaves – whichever ones were not claimed were crucified. 6000 slaves involved in a rebellion were all crucified at once on the road leading to Rome. 2000 people in Palestine were crucified for their rebellion. For a Jew, the cross represented the worst way to die. To be crucified, in the eyes of a Jew, meant that you have been cursed by God. If you lived in the early first century, the cross would be a symbol of shame and terror for you.

Initially, the cross was not a symbol in the Christian church – it was forbidden by early church leaders to be pictured in religious art. Things changed when the Roman emperor Constantine took over. He wasn’t really interested in the person of Jesus Christ, and, in his opinion, the cross as an embarrassing symbol. But, for some reason, he adopted the symbol as a “good luck charm” and symbol of triumph, and placed the symbol of the cross on the shields of his soldiers.

The cross was not common in religious art until the fourth century, when everyone who had ever seen a live crucifixion had died. What does the cross symbolize to you? For one man in the early first century, the cross began as a symbol of death, but became a symbol of life and forgiveness and relief, as we will see this evening.

Jesus was led out to be crucified, and two criminals were led out with him. When they came to a place called “the Skull,” the Roman soldiers crucified Jesus, with one criminal on his left, and one on his right. Here a prophecy is fulfilled: Isaiah had foretold that Jesus would be numbered with the transgressors. When Jesus was hung on the cross, he was lowered to the level of a criminal. He was brought down to the same level as those other two criminals, and everyone else who had ever been crucified.

Many people were mocking Christ, including these two criminals. Luke tells us what one of the criminals said: “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us!” “If you’re the Messiah, the Son of God, like you say you are, why don’t you get out of this situation? And get us out of here too!” This criminal blasphemes Christ, mocking his claim to be the Son of God.

The way this criminal blasphemes the Messiah reminds us of how our world today blasphemes Christ. “Jesus is the Son of God?” people say. “I don’t think so. Why doesn’t he prove it? Why doesn’t he do something to prove that he is the Son of God, someone I should worship? Prove it!” People today mock the idea of Jesus being the Savior of the world, just like that criminal hanging next to Jesus.

Unfortunately, we see ourselves as we see this criminal mocking Christ. We have more in common with that criminal than we would like to admit. In the eyes of God, all
of us, really are criminals. All of us have led lives of disobedience and rebellion against God. “Do things this way,” God says. And we say, “No, I’ll do things my way instead.” We live lives that violate God’s will, over and over again. You and I are criminals in the eyes of God. Sometimes we even blaspheme our Savior. When things don’t go our way, we say to Jesus, “I doubt that you are the Savior. I doubt that you are the Son of God. Prove it. Prove that you are who you say you are. Show me!” we say. And this is blasphemy – on the same level as that thief on the cross. We are sinners, and ultimately, it is because of our sin that Jesus is suffering. It wasn’t the Jews. It wasn’t the Romans. But it was us – our rebellion, our blasphemy, our sin – that’s what put Christ on the cross. That’s why he is suffering, taking the punishment that we deserve for our sin.

But one of the criminals has a change of heart. Instead of continuing to mock Christ, he grows silent, and then he rebukes his fellow criminal: “Don’t you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” A change of heart takes place in this criminal. He starts to defend Christ. He confesses his sinful life – “we are getting what our deeds deserve.” He even acknowledges that Jesus is innocent. What was happening in the heart of this criminal?

He was repenting. The Holy Spirit was working. Perhaps, as he hung from the cross, he realized the depth of his sin. Perhaps he remembered all the things he had learned about the Messiah when he was younger, the idea of a suffering Messiah, a Messiah that would be mocked. As he hung from the cross, the Holy Spirit led him to repent, to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

He defends Christ. He confesses his sin. And then, he turns to Christ, and says, “Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.” In other words, “I repent of my life as a criminal. I repent of my mockery. I believe that you are a king, the Messiah who was to come. I believe that you have fulfilled the Old Testament. I believe that you are a King who shows mercy. Forgive me for the life I have led. Forgive me for the way I mocked you. When you come into your kingdom, have mercy on me. Remember me.

These words of repentance are also our words, aren’t they. As we see Jesus die on the cross, we also pray, “O Lord, forgive me for my life of rebelling against you. Forgive me for mocking you by doubting you and questioning you. Forgive me. Have mercy on me. Remember me.

And Jesus, even though he was being shown no mercy, showed mercy to that criminal. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus says, “today you will be with me in paradise.” Crucifixion was supposed to be a 2 or 3 day process. But Jesus tells this man, today, this very day, you will be in paradise, heaven, that wonderful place souls go before Judgment Day. This very day, you will be there, and you’ll be there with me, your Messiah, your King.” Jesus gives to this man an unconditional pardon – he completely and totally forgives him, and gives him the hope of eternal life.

Why? Because, at that very moment, Jesus was dying for that criminal’s sins on the cross. At that very moment, Jesus was dying for all that man’s criminal acts against society and against God. Jesus was paying for that. All that mockery – Jesus was paying for that too. What amazing love, that as Jesus suffers for this man, he offers him forgiveness, an unconditional pardon, the sure hope of eternal life.

Jesus does the same thing for you. How is it that Jesus can say to you, “Without a doubt, you are forgiven. I am with you always, and someday, you will be with me in
paradise.” Jesus says that to you – how?

Because here on the cross, Jesus is taking all of your sins away. All the different ways we have rebelled against God, all those moments of mocking and doubting God in our minds, Jesus, right here, is paying for those sins. Because of this moment on the cross, Jesus offers to you an unconditional pardon, a clean slate, the sure hope of eternal life with him.

What did the cross mean for this criminal? At first, I’m sure, it was a symbol of shame and terror and death. It meant that he was cursed by God. But now, because of what Jesus says to him here, the cross takes on a new meaning for him. Here is where he meets his Savior. Here is where he confesses his sin. Here is where he receives a wonderful pardon from the Son of God. Here is where he receives his salvation.

What does the cross mean to you? All kinds of things come to mind, I’m sure. But let this moment we have focused on today be one of those things, the chief thing, that comes to mind. You see, you are that criminal on Mt. Calvary, the place of the skull. And as you consider all the sins in your life and wonder, can God really forgive me? Then, remember the cross. There Jesus calls out to you, and assures you are forgiven, that you will be with him in paradise. Every Sunday morning, you hear that God forgives you. It’s because of the cross. The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper – these are God’s gifts to you, made possible only by the cross. Why is it, that God hears your prayers? How can you be so confident, that God really does love you, that there is a place in heaven for you? It’s because of the cross. May it always remind you of Jesus Christ, his sacrifice for you, and the salvation that is yours because of him. Amen.