

In the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Archaeologist Indiana Jones searches for the long-lost Ark of the Covenant hoping to find the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Although he finds the Ark, the stone tablets have turned to dust. At the end of the movie, the Ark is placed in a crate in a giant warehouse where it is likely never to be found again.

Truth is stranger than fiction. In the year 320, the Roman Emperor's mother, Helena, a devout Christian, journeyed to Jerusalem to search for the cross that Jesus was crucified on. We must do a little archaeology ourselves to understand how such an exalted relic in the Christian faith could have ever been lost in the first place.

100 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Roman Emperor Hadrian viewed both Judaism and Christianity as hostile to his rule. In order to exert his authority and to attempt to suppress the religions, he demolished religious sites. The Jerusalem Temple was already in ruins from a revolt in 70 A.D. Hadrian demolished what was left of the temple. "To eradicate the influence of Christianity, Hadrian leveled the top of Mount Calvary and erected a temple to the pagan goddess Venus. He also cut away and leveled the hillside where Jesus' tomb stood and built a temple to the pagan god Jupiter... Ironically, this destruction actually preserved the sacred sites." <sup>i</sup>

Two centuries later, Christianity came out from under a long period of persecution. In 313, Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan which officially ended the persecution of Christians by the Roman government. To make amends for centuries of persecution, Constantine used state funds to help build churches. The emperor's mother, Helena, became Christian about the time Constantine came to power. A dozen years later, she traveled to Palestine in search of the religious sites that she came to know through her faith.

With her son as emperor, Helena was powerful and rich. She used that influence to do good. She had a church built in Bethlehem to foster devotion and to honor of the birth of Jesus. Likewise, she had another church built at the site of the Ascension of Jesus. The historian Eusebius paints a picture of her that helps us to understand why she was declared a saint of the Church. "Especially abundant were the gifts she bestowed on the naked and unprotected poor. To some she gave money, to others an ample supply of clothing; she liberated some from imprisonment, or from the bitter servitude of the mines; others she delivered from unjust oppression, and others again, she restored from exile." <sup>ii</sup>

In Jerusalem, pagan temples were torn down and workers made some amazing discoveries. They unearthed the tomb of Jesus and also found the site where Jesus had been crucified. Emperor Constantine enlisted the help of the Bishop of Jerusalem to search for the cross from Calvary. East of Mount Calvary, three crosses were found in a rock cistern along with a wooden plaque. We recall from our reading of the Passion, "Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews"" (John 19:19). The plaque was not attached to the cross, so a miracle was called for to figure out which was the true cross.

A woman near death, touched each of the crosses. Upon touching the third and final cross, she was cured thus providing the proof that the article was indeed a genuine relic. Some of the church Fathers of the 4th century provide additional details:<sup>iii</sup>

- Saint Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, preached that when St. Helena found the true cross, "she worshiped not the wood, but the King, Him who hung on the wood. She burned with an earnest desire of touching the guarantee of immortality."
- Saint Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, wrote in a letter to Constantine's son and successor, "The saving wood of the cross was found at Jerusalem in the time of Constantine." And

in Saint Cyril's teachings on the faith he wrote, "He was truly crucified for our sins. For if you would deny it, the place refutes you visibly, this blessed Golgotha, in which we are now assembled for the sake of Him who was here crucified; and the whole world has since been filled with pieces of the wood of the Cross."

Today's feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross celebrates a double anniversary. In addition to the discovery of the true cross by Helena in the between the years 320-325, we also remember the dedication of two churches in 335. The Emperor Constantine had a church built above the empty grave of Jesus called the Anastasis and a basilica, the Martyrium. In the square between the two churches a shrine marks the place of the crucifixion.<sup>iv</sup> Saint Francis of Assisi says it well: "We adore You, O Christ, and we praise You, because by Your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world."<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Fr. William Saunders, [catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/st-helena-and-the-true-cross.html](http://catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/st-helena-and-the-true-cross.html)

<sup>ii</sup> The Life of Constantine, XLIV, XLV

<sup>iii</sup> Saunders

<sup>iv</sup> Ordo, entry for September 14.

<sup>v</sup> Saunders