“He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.” Words from our 2nd reading today from the 2nd chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians – sisters and brothers, may the Lord give to you his peace and his joy.

There’s a story of a young boy who was a huge troublemaker in school from the time he was in kindergarten. He had been expelled from several public schools for bad behavior. His parents were at their wits’ end. Even though they weren’t Christian and didn’t understand anything about Christianity, they enrolled their son at the Catholic elementary school in town as the last resort. Both the parents and the religious sisters who ran the school were expecting discipline problems, but strangely none came. After about a month in which their son had been acting like an angel in school, his mother and father told them that they were really happy at how well behaved he was and how well he was doing with all his school work. With a smile they asked him if he would tell them what had brought about this positive change in him. “As soon as I got into the first class,” he told them, “I looked up and on top of the blackboard, they put this statue of a man stripped to his underwear and nailed to two-by-fours. I knew that that at this school they don’t fool around and I didn’t want to misbehave and become the next person for that to happen to!”

Scars are visible reminders of past injuries and often enough there is a story associated with each scar we bear. Jesus was no exception and in that memorable meeting with Thomas in the Upper Room, he showed him the scars or wounds left by his passion on the cross thereby confirming the reality of his resurrection. The cross serves a similar purpose, telling our story and reflecting our faith, such that our exaltation of this otherwise terrible instrument of execution is transformed into an instrument of salvation by the overwhelming love of the one who hung upon it. Our devotion to the cross is thus not for the purpose of focusing on Jesus’ pain and suffering, but rather to proclaim the incredible love God manifested towards us.

We too have scars, not just physical but spiritual and psychological scars that mark the difficult road we have traveled as we made our way through life. The sufferings and injuries of these scars is our participation in the cross of Jesus as he asks us to take up our cross and follow him. But as the two criminals executed with Jesus show us, the cross can be either an occasion of grace and liberation or the cross and its sufferings can serve to deepen our bitterness and alienation from God which is indeed a possibility and a choice. Like the good thief who cried out ‘remember me when you come into your kingdom,’ our celebration of the Exaltation of the Cross is our faith-filled conviction that all sufferings can, with grace and our loving surrender, become transformative.

Certainly, there are great struggles and traumatic events, but those inevitable small daily crosses and sufferings can also be transformative when patiently born in a spirit of charity and detachment. Indeed, these daily struggles train us to more easily absorb and integrate those greater and traumatic sufferings. And as each small daily trial or suffering is allowed to become transformative, this seemingly insignificant cross is itself transformed and exalted and thereby reflects something of the radiant glory of the Cross of Christ.

Thus, our scars may come to represent the healing and integration that has occurred and now serve as reminders of the power of God’s forgiving and healing mercy giving us occasions for wonder and deep gratitude. Nevertheless, even for those who surrender, and lean into their faith, and take up their cross alongside Jesus, the transforming effect of suffering doesn’t always proceed smoothly or quickly. Indeed, some of our scars remain painful and traumatic reminders that still await a fuller integration into who we are becoming in Christ. While I imagine this is hard for many, I admit that there are some significant aspects of my life in which I do not suffer well, and I am grateful to a parishioner who put that idea to me earlier this summer, that this is something I want to work on this coming year: how can I suffer better and bear my sufferings more patiently? I don’t know. I know it will be humbling. I know I have much to learn. I know that it will not be easy. And yet I know too that it will be worth it, because as I learn to die and to die to myself and to say no to things that take away my peace, it will allow me to say yes to greater things and make for the transformation that God has in store for us, just like Jesus did, out of love for us all.

And so, let the Exaltation of the Cross become a proclamation of our faith in God’s power to transform even our worst sufferings and make them instruments—like his cross—opening us to grace and bringing us to eternal life and eternal glory, in the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy spirit. Amen