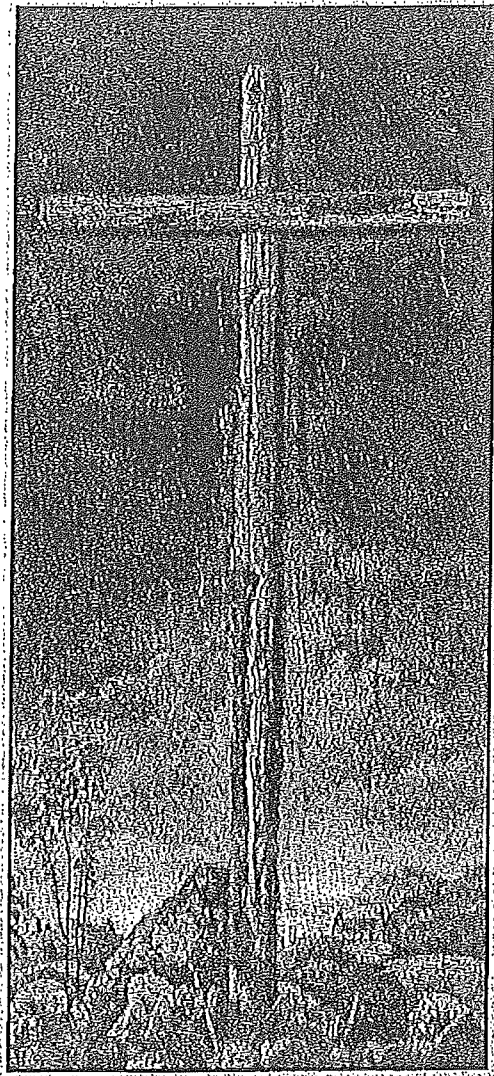


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ON A HILL  
TOO FAR  
AWAY



Putting

the Cross

Back in the

Center of

Our Lives

JOHN FISCHER



# The Old Greenwich Cross



**I**N OLD GREENWICH, CONNECTICUT, stands a church with a cross in it. Unlike most churches, whose crosses adorn the front wall behind the preacher, this one is bolted down into the concrete floor in front of the platform, not more than three feet from where the preacher stands.

Its positioning defies reason and art and convention. No architect in his right mind would have designed such a placement. It is an obstruction. The preacher's words have to pass through it; the congregation's eyes always have it somewhere in view, so that even when they look away, it is still there, impressed on the back wall of the retina.

It is a sturdy wooden cross, ten feet tall. The cross bar is set high on the vertical beam, so high that it

seems out of proportion compared to other more proportionate crosses that decorate other more proportionate churches.

Nothing about this cross is pretty. It is made of raw, untreated wood, and when you see it up close, you think of splinters, of something hard... immovable. It is set deep in the concrete floor as well as bolted to it, so that a blow makes it vibrate rapidly. Strike it hard enough, and it will answer back in a low tone. I've heard that it can be removed, but not without great difficulty, because of its size and weight.

I got hit once with a baseball bat when I was a kid—walked right into my brother's backswing during a family softball game. The blow broke my nose. For some reason, that distant memory makes my face ache when I think about this cross—as if I might forget about it for a moment, turn around too quickly, and meet it head-on.

But it would be almost impossible to forget about this cross. When I was standing and talking with someone or walking anywhere near the front of the church, I had a tendency to shy away from it—to lean unconsciously, to make sure I always knew where it was... or, more accurately, where I was in relation to it.

The minute I walked into the church in Old Greenwich and encountered this startling placement of the cross, I felt as if I had discovered something truly significant. For just as the cross has been placed squarely in the center of this church, so it has always stood in the center of history, and in the center of any life that has truly embraced it. And just as the placement of

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## The Old Greenwich Cross

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this cross seems uncomfortable, so it is... and so it should be. There is nothing comfortable about the cross.



This raw, wooden cross in the middle of the floor manages to defy the efforts we often make to soften its blow. Most crosses we encounter are harmless. They dangle from an ear or a wrist or lie in the nape of a pretty neck. They perch atop buildings or adorn the interior walls of our places of worship. The cross has become as an ornament, a religious symbol mellowed by sentimental value. Some think that wearing a cross or hanging it on a wall makes God more favorably disposed to them. Others attribute some kind of magical/or superstitious power to it, like a ball player signing the cross before he swings away.

The cross as a symbol has become more like a charm on a bracelet than a huge, rough, inconvenient reminder I might bump into in the front of a church. That is what makes this cross in Old Greenwich stand out. It is not something to wear or wish upon. You can't bring it into your life that easily. You can't hold it in your hand and bring it lovingly to your chest. You can't even pass your hand across its surface without getting splinters. The closest you could get to this cross would be to hug it, and hugging this cross is a little like hugging a tree.

The bold placement of this particular cross takes

On a Hill *Too* Far Away

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on a special significance in this last decade of the twentieth century. The church in America has become increasingly accustomed to a Christianity without a cross—or, at best, with one hanging harmlessly in the background. In our eagerness to popularize Christianity, we have created a very user-friendly gospel that asks for hardly a sacrifice. We have forgotten that in the middle of this gospel stands a cross—an instrument of execution, whose splinters are largely ignored by a contemporary Christian world eager to tell mostly the good part of the story.

