

You are witnesses!

Meditation on Luke 24:36-53

May 28, 2017

Ascension of the Lord

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' 37They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' 40And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' 42They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you— that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. 45Then he opened their ' minds to understand the scriptures, 46and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, 47and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48You are witnesses of these things. 49And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. 51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. 52And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; 53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Private Desmond Doss, a conscientious objector who enlisted in the army because he felt morally obligated to his country, served in one of

the bloodiest battles of World War II--without a rifle. He had only his faith and his Bible to protect and strengthen him. It was April 1945. Okinawa. Desmond and his battalion had to climb to the top of a sheer 400-foot cliff, fortified with a network of Japanese machine gun nests and deadly booby traps. The treacherously steep cliff and the battle at the plateau on top were key to the Allies winning the battle of Okinawa. The cliff was nicknamed *Hacksaw Ridge*, the title of a recent movie that tells Desmond's heroic story.

Desmond, born Feb. 7, 1919, was from Lynchburg, VA. He was raised in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, which emphasized Sabbath keeping, nonviolence and a vegetarian lifestyle. His father was a WWI veteran who suffered from alcoholism and depression. Desmond attended a Seventh Day Adventist school until the 8th grade, then got a job at a lumberyard to help support his family. On April 1, 1942, he enlisted in the military, in spite of his work at a shipyard in Newport News that qualified him for a deferment. He hoped to be a medic.

At basic training at Fort Jackson, S.C., Desmond encountered hostility from fellow recruits when he refused to carry a rifle. His small size and shy temperament added to his vulnerability to insults and physical abuse. The other soldiers believed he would not just be useless in battle; he would be a major liability. His superiors attempted to have him discharged from the military. He persevered with his convictions. Finally, he was permitted to serve as a medic and was not forced to carry a rifle.

Desmond earned a Bronze Star for aiding wounded soldiers under fire when he served in Guam and the Philippines in 1944. Then in 1945,

when his battalion's mission was thought to be impossible and was ordered to retreat, Desmond refused to leave his wounded comrades behind. He ran alone into the battlefield, facing heavy machine gun and artillery fire, finding and carrying the wounded to the edge of the cliff. He singlehandedly lowered them down Hacksaw Ridge on a rope to safety. Every time he saved one man's life, he prayed, "Lord, please help me get one more." In one night, he rescued an estimated 75 men, including his captain, Jack Glover, who had tried to have him transferred.

"He was one of the bravest persons alive," Glover says in *Hacksaw Ridge*. "And then to have him end up saving my life was the irony of the whole thing."

For his actions above and beyond the call of duty that night, Desmond was awarded the Medal of Honor. Those in his battalion who witnessed Desmond's actions that night, including those whose lives he saved, had new respect and appreciation for the man they had ridiculed for praying, reading his Bible, observing the Sabbath and refusing to carry a rifle. Their hearts were opened to see the witness of Desmond's strong faith that compelled him to put others' needs and very lives before his own.

Desmond answered the call of the risen and ascending Christ, who charges his followers in Luke 24 to proclaim repentance and forgiveness to all the nations, telling them, "You are witnesses of these things."

The “things” of which Jesus speaks are the resurrection appearances that the disciples are discussing at the beginning of today’s reading (in 24:36). The 11 are gathered in Jerusalem, along with other followers, including the two who saw the risen Christ as they were leaving Jerusalem and going home to Emmaus. Jesus greets his disciples with, “Peace to you!” This is “Shalom” in Hebrew; “Eirene” in Greek. This is the same way he greets them in two of John’s resurrection appearances (John 20:19). And this is how he teaches them to greet the households they visit in Luke 10:5-6: “Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you.”

The disciples are terrified, despite his greeting and the other resurrection appearances they have witnessed. Jesus knows they are thinking they are seeing a ghost or spirit (*pneuma*) and he asks them, (literally) “Why do thoughts arise in your hearts?” The word that means “thoughts” and is translated “doubts” has a negative connotation here. But the same word is translated more neutrally in Luke 1:29--when Mary responds to the angel’s announcements: “⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

So Jesus offers more proof that he is not just a vision or apparition.

“See that I am myself,” is what Jesus literally says in v. 39. “Touch me and see,” he continues and mentions his “flesh and bones.” Then he shows them his hands and feet. Does this touching and seeing convince them? Not completely. In verse 41, we read of their “joy” and yet how they are “disbelieving and still wondering.”

Here's my favorite part. "You got anything to eat?" Jesus asks. THIS is the Jesus they know and love. Jesus in Luke 7:34 imitates the Pharisees complaining about him: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" When Jesus eats the fish "in their presence," we hear echoes of Emmaus and Jesus' revealing himself in the breaking of bread. And then, also like Emmaus, Jesus opens his disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures--and see how he is the fulfillment of them.

Luke's book draws near to a close with just a few sentences about the ascension, which might lead some to believe that it isn't that important. But it is. The ascension is the culmination of the gospel. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of our destiny! This is why we were created --to be the image of God--and we are, when united with Christ, who is, as we read in Col. 1:15 "the image of the invisible God," and in Hebrews 1:3-4, the "reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being."

Reformer John Calvin writes in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "From this (the ascension) our faith receives many benefits. First it understands that the Lord by his ascent opened the way into the Heavenly Kingdom, which had been closed through Adam. Since he entered heaven in our flesh, as if in our name, it follows, as the apostle says, that in a sense we already "sit with God in the heavenly places in him," so that we do not await heaven with a bare hope, but in our Head already possess it."

As Luke ends, Jesus ascends while blessing the disciples, like Moses when the Israelites had completed the tabernacle, just as God had

commanded, in Exodus 39:42-43. The disciples worship Jesus as he is carried up into heaven from Bethany, hometown of Mary and Martha and younger brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead.

The ascension is the bridge to the rest of the story--Acts. Luke closes with the joy of believers and their obedience to Jesus--returning to praise and bless the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem--awaiting the Spirit that will enable them to become the community of God the Lord intends them to be. When they will be empowered to be Christ's *witnesses*.

The movie, *Hacksaw Ridge*, doesn't go much beyond Desmond Doss' heroic 12-hour-rescue of 75 men. But the man who was the first conscientious objector to ever earn a Medal of Honor would spend the rest of his life, like many other war veterans, trying to put the past behind him. He didn't think he was a hero. Wounded 4 times on Okinawa, he had extensive damage to his left arm that prevented him from pursuing a career in carpentry after the war, as he had hoped. And he had contracted tuberculosis while serving in the Philippines. After 5 and a half years of treatment--and losing a lung and 5 ribs--he was discharged from the hospital with 90% disability. An overdose of antibiotics later left him deaf in one ear.

The part of his life that the movie left out is, to me, also heroic--the more than 60 years that he overcame the challenges of his disability to care for his family on a small farm in Rising Fawn, Georgia. Though his injuries prevented him from working full time, he continued to serve the

Lord and his church until he died in 2006 at age 87.

When I think about the people I admire most, I think of courageous, unselfish people of faith like Desmond who put the needs and very lives of others before his own. I am grateful to all our veterans, particularly on Memorial Day, when we remember those who died for our country.

I also admire those who simply, quietly, faithfully serve the Lord every day. I see this--all the time--at our church!! I saw it this week in so many ways and especially on Wednesday--as we prepared for our preschool's VPK graduation. People who don't do what they do for money. People who lovingly, patiently labor for the peace of knowing that the things they do to help, encourage and bring joy to others--the little acts of kindness in Jesus' name--is what being Christ's witnesses is all about.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, to be our Savior, to suffer and die for our sins, but then to be raised and ascended to live with you. Thank you for our hope of being raised with Him and everlasting life with you in a place without tears, suffering, sadness, anger, violence, or war. Thank you for the soldiers who served and those who are serving our country today. Bless them with peace and help them, if they struggle to find their way back into life and work at home in the States, once again. Comfort the families of those who worry about their sons and daughters who serve in dangerous, wartorn places. Empower us by your Spirit to be your faithful, humble witnesses, serving you with loving words and acts of kindness to encourage and help others every day. In Christ we pray. Amen.