

Glory Road

Acts 1:1-14; Luke 24:44-53

Whitefish UMC

Ascension Sunday, May 4, 2008

- † Remember the bumper stickers that were all the rage a few years ago? They concerned the effects of what would happen when the righteous would be whisked up to heaven in glory—aka the Rapture.
- † The first volley in the Rapture bumper sticker contest offered: “Warning: in case of the rapture, this car will be unmanned.” Shortly thereafter, you could find “In case of the rapture, can I have your car?” sported around town. Or the more cosmic, “In case of the rapture, the earth will be ours.”
- † Just the other day, I spotted, “The rapture is not an exit strategy,” which was an updated version of the earlier efforts. I remember seeing a T-shirt on someone that featured a wistful looking dog gazing up at the bottom of two feet flying up into heaven, accompanied by some clever caption that I can’t remember.
- † On this Ascension Sunday, I can’t get that image on the T-shirt out of my mind. What are we to make of the idea of Jesus being shot up to heaven to sit at God’s right hand in this post-modern age of space exploration?
- † One pastor tells of teaching a Sunday school class to thirteen-year-olds back in the early 1960’s (about the time I was thirteen). In the class was a boy named Eddie Marderosian, who was very smart and kept up with current events, knew a lot about astronomy, and otherwise liked to shock and disrupt the lesson.

- † Out of the blue (no pun intended) he asked, “I wonder how far Jesus has traveled since the Ascension. If we assume that he is traveling at the speed of light, he has only reached the far ends of our Galaxy, the Milky Way.”
- † Of course Eddie’s tongue-in-cheek question reminds us that we aren’t talking about a literal lift-off of Jesus into the heavens, but a symbolic one. The Ascension of Jesus, coming just prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit to the apostles at Pentecost, reminds us that the resurrected Christ is no longer confined to this earth, but returns to cosmic glory, from which he originated as the Logos, the Word of God.
- † From their roots in Greek philosophy, the longings of the human heart have in part consisted of getting beyond the weight of matter and into the realm of pure spirit. Many religions claim that life with God can only be attained by being freed from the bonds of earth, from the pull of gravity, from the body. To be with God for these adherents means to be in another place than here.
- † Luke, writing in the gospel and the book of Acts, describes the understandable reaction of the disciples to Jesus’ disappearance in the proverbial clouds. They gaze up toward heaven, mouths agape like tourists in Manhattan who have never seen skyscrapers before.
- † Suddenly, two men in white robes (where have we seen them before?) appear and ask them: “You, Galileans, why do you stand looking up toward heaven?” It’s almost as dumb a question as they asked to the women at the tomb on Easter morning “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”
- † Of course the women weren’t looking for the living, but were coming to anoint their dead Teacher, Jesus. We humans often seem to look

for Jesus in the wrong place—in the tomb, in the clouds, on the mountaintop, in the temple, on the throne.

- † And so it's no wonder that some Christians find it easier to predict that Armageddon will solve all the problems in the Middle East than to work for peace. Why should we look to earth where things have turned bad, gas and food prices are out of control, and distraction is the name of the game?
- † The men in the white robes don't respond to our protestations, but Jesus did. After the resurrection, Jesus spent time with his disciples in Jerusalem. For forty days he spoke with them about the kingdom of God.
- † When they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" Jesus answered, "It is not for you to know the times or the periods that God has set by divine authority, BUT
- † you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." That is, says Barbara Lundblad, the promise of the Spirit is a promise for this earth, this place, this time.
- † "Jesus will be forever messed up with this earthly life in the power of the Holy Spirit." So we needn't look for him in the clouds, but instead on the road that led to his glory. And that "glory road" was no highway paved with gold bricks, but the twisting, bumpy, rocky, dusty road to out-of-the-way places where people needed healing and feeding and freeing.
- † Have you seen the movie "Glory Road?" It's one of the better sports inspiration movies, along with "Hoosiers," and "Remember the Titans." The film tells the painful story of the 1966 Texas Western

- Miners, where rookie coach Don Haskins, a 35-year old white man, dared to fill out his lineup with mostly African American players.
- † In a time of overt racism in which conventional wisdom held that African Americans weren't intelligent enough to play top-level college basketball, Haskins defies the incredulous skeptics by fielding an all-black team in the national championship against all-white Kentucky.
 - † Along the way the coach and his family, as well as the team, have had to endure attacks of terror and appalling torment. But they call on the spirit that enlarges their hearts and wills to overcome even the deepest pitfalls.
 - † Sure it's formulaic and predictable, but there's a reason that it works. The team, composed of blacks and whites and not used to working together, has to overcome the barriers that normally divide them in order to achieve the glory they long for.
 - † And lest you think that the climate of 1966, when the movie takes place, is a distant memory, read beyond the headlines in today's political contests. It's an environment in which high numbers of people won't vote for an African American, won't vote for an aggressive woman, won't vote for an older person regardless of the color of his skin or his gender.
 - † "Why do you stand looking up into heaven?" No wonder, when it's easier to look for a pure world up there or out there, especially when we look at the divisions in the church, the body of Christ.
 - † As our United Methodist General Conference closes with divisions over region, sexual orientation, theology, and tradition, we see so many flaws, so many things wrong.

- † I can't tell you how many times I've heard this from people who don't go to church: "Show me a church where pastors aren't self-serving, where people aren't hypocrites, where compassion is broadly practiced, and then I'll become a member."
- † Does such a church exist? I don't know, but I want to help make it happen. It's possible, not because we are perfect, but because God's Spirit is perfect and will enlarge our hearts for it.
- † Annie Dillard, another favorite author, writes about our longings for something beyond an admittedly imperfect church in her book, *Holy the Firm*:

A blur of romance clings to our notion of these people in the Bible as though of course God should come to these simple folks, these Sunday school watercolor figures, who are so purely themselves, while we now are complex and full at heart. We are busy. So, I see now, were they. Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord? There is no one but us. There is no one to send nor a pure heart on the face of this earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time.

But there is no one but us. There never has been. There are generations which remembered, and generations which forgot; there has never been a generation of whole men and women who lived well for even one day."

- † Jesus asks his disciples to prepare, to wait until the time is right and the Holy Spirit comes. The preparation and the waiting are hard. How will we know when the time is at hand?

- † We know what the glory of God looks and feels like. It is the community of earth living together in genuine love that gives without counting the cost and rejoices in the uniqueness of each creature and person. But it is so hard to realize that dream.
- † There is a community of Christians that seeks to realize this profound love. It's the ecumenical community of Taize. Taize is a tiny village hidden in the hills of Burgundy in southeastern France, which, since 1940, has been the home of a group of people who practice daily liturgical prayer in common and in many languages.
- † To this community come thousands of visitors each year who pray and worship together. Taize began as the dream of a young Frenchman whose consciousness of the need for human reconciliation was shaped by the horrors of World War II.
- † Brother Roger, the group's founder, had given refuge to Jews fleeing the Nazi occupation. After the war, he retired to a life of solitude to listen to the whisper of God's Spirit. Soon he was joined by other men, mostly Protestant Christians, and then Roman Catholic brothers, who dedicate themselves to reconciliation and peace.
- † Now there are small bands of the Taize community working around the world, living among the poor. Believing that if the church yearns for reconciliation among the nations and races of the world, it must begin with itself, offering genuine love and communion for all Christians.
- † Taize has been especially popular among young people from many different countries who have made their pilgrimages to the hills of Burgundy to share the prayers of the community and their lives and concerns with one another.

- † On our vacation as the Ascension is celebrated and Pentecost begins, Tom and I will join the pilgrims at Taize for a couple of days to prepare and wait and be inspired.
- † Last week we sang the chorus to one of the songs that forms the vision of Taize and the whole Christian community. Taize tries to put flesh on this ancient hymn, *Ubi Caritas*.

*Where true love and charity are found,
God is always there.*

*Since the love of Christ has brought us all together,
Let us all rejoice and be glad, now and always.
Let everyone love the Lord God, the living God;
And with sincere hearts let us love each other now.*

*Therefore when we gather as one in Christ Jesus,
Let our love enfold each race, creed, ev'ry person,
Let envy, division, and strife cease among us;
May Christ our Lord dwell among us in every heart.*

*Bring us with your saints to behold your great beauty,
There to see you, Christ our God, throned in great glory'
There to possess heaven's peace and joy, your truth and love,
For endless ages of ages, world without end.*

- † As we prepare to receive Holy Communion together, may we remember that there is no one but us to make the dream of God's kingdom real, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

† May we follow Jesus on the road to that glory, stumbling, singing,
forgiving as he did, as we remember that on the night he gave himself
up for us....

Sources:

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www.day1.net

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