



**May 16, 2010
Ascension Sunday**

*“Blessed by Nail-Scarred Hands”**

Rev. James Lamkin

**Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:15-23;
Luke 24:44-53**

The most amazing thing to me about these texts is that Jesus left it all in our hands—left the Gospel, left the church, left the world in our hands.

That is the meaning, the traction point, of these ascension stories of Jesus for me. The miracle is not did Jesus float upward like cloud rising...or did he blast off like Iron Man? For me the question is not whether it is literal or not—to me that is not very important. Rather, what is important is what the story says about God. And what it says about God is that God thinks we are enough. That you are enough. And the most hard of all for me to believe, that I am enough. That is the miracle.

Yes, Jesus left us to go sit at God’s right hand...not only that, he left us with each other. And, oh yes, the Holy spirit.

As he was being taken up, he lifted his hands and blessed. He blessed them...and through them, us. With his nail-scarred hands he blessed our hands.

Wouldn’t it be something if, while we are pondering these texts, that our hearts were squeezed like a sponge, dropped in a pool of God’s blessing and after soaking it up, we leave here full? Wouldn’t that be something?

One day I looked and saw that I was wearing my father’s hands. What surprised me was how readily I recognized them---partially because of how dry they looked and scaly and wrinkled and along with spots and colors and scars from misadventures with knives.

One day I looked and saw I was wearing my father's hands.

I had watched my father's hands, many a time. Left hand on the two by four, right hand on the saw which he would draw back and forth across a gun barrel grey line made by a flat pencil across a carpenter's square on pine lumber. The smell of the wood, the sing-song sound of the saw---whee, whoo, whee, whoo---and the sight of my father's hands gripping and releasing hand saws and Phillips head screwdrivers and claw hammers and trout lines with fish hooks bated with chicken livers, hands that toted a 20 gauge double-barrel when squirrel hunting, hands that made sure he never went anywhere in a suit without an American flag pin on his lapel, or his Possums Unlimited tie tack on his Van Hussein. His hands not only are deep in my memory; they are on the end of my arms.

One day I looked and saw that I was wearing my father's hands.

The way the Christian Scriptures tell the story, when the church looked at Jesus' hands, they saw God's hands. The recognition came in the way he used his hands to heal deaf and blind and troubled people; the way he used his hands to draw in the sand words that led to absolution and a rebooted life; the way his hands grabbed some chords, cracked them like a whip and drove in judgment the money changers out of the temple; the way he carried his cross; the way he used his hands to break the bread before the bug-eyed disciples weary from the Emmaus Road and they recognized him by the way his hands blessed and broke the bread.

When the church remembered the Nazarene carpenter's hands, his hands reminded them of their nurturing, challenging, comforting God.

In fact, the last memory that the church had of Jesus is his hands. "And as he was taken up into heaven, he raised his hands and blessed them."

For the last several years it has enchanted me to remember that the hands he used to bless them were nail-scarred. And the disciples' response to this nail-scarred blessing? They gazed. They stared, drop-jawed, dumbfounded with the question, "Now What?" written on their forehead.

My father would say, "They were like calves staring at a new gate. They looked like a tree full of owls."

Two white guys show up—favorite figures in Luke's writings. Like Moses and Elijah did with Jesus on the Mt. of Transfiguration, like the two in dazzling apparel did at Luke's account of the empty tomb. The white guys ask a question. It sounds as dumb as the disciples' sense of dumbfoundedness. "Why do you stand gazing up into heaven?"

Well, wouldn't you? I would be one of the star-gazers if Jesus went up like a bottle rocket blessing all the way. And yet the two white guys want to know why are you gazing?

Well, here is why I would be gazing:

First, I would be gazing because Jesus' blessing was coming through hands that are nail-scarred hands that wounds need not have the last word... Hands scarred, not just by Roman spikes and hammers, but also by the fears, cowardice, denial, and betrayal of those disciples whom he was blessing.

And in a mysterious and mystical way, my fears, my cowardice, my betrayal, did some of the wounding too.

And his scars remind me of my own scar tissue. Of my distance from God and often my distance from myself.

And so remorsefully, I gaze. that though it is hard to believe, I can hear his words while nailed to the cross, "Father forgive them for they know now what they do," and the words are reinforced by nail-scarred hands blessing me in spite of what I have done.

BB McKinney was a song writer...a gospel song writer. He is a fellow Louisiana College alumnus. One of his songs goes,

“Have you failed in your plan of your storm tossed life?

Place your hand in the nail-scarred hand.

Are you weary and worn from its toil and strife?

Place your hand in the nail-scarred hand.

He will keep till the end he's your dearest friend.

Place your hand in the nail-scarred hand.

I had thought I had out-grown that song...until those times when my storm tossed life has nearly sunk my boat.

When God resurrected Jesus, the scars were not removed, they were perpetuated.

Part of the appeal of Jesus to me is that this Messiah knows what it is like to live scarred.

That notion also intrigued the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews who spoke of Jesus job description now. He is a high priest sitting in the heavenlies who knows what it is like to be human.

Today is senior adult day. Our church is a founding member of Lifespan, formerly known as North Atlanta Senior Services. We've been asked to recognize today as an appreciation of Seniors day. And that is easy because we already do. Tiffany Cox, our intern, has helped put this together.

And who are our Seniors? As we heard last week: everyone older than Mike Gregg. Seniors have a lot to offer... (otherwise Betty White would never have ended-up hosting Saturday Night Live).

Part of why we need your equity is because we need you wisdom that often comes from woundedness.

When the recession was spiraling out as our anxiety ratched up, to whom did the news networks turn...not the X Generation, or the Boomer Generation, but to the Greatest Generation...tell us how did you survive the Great Depression?

What we need from you is your wisdom of how disasters don't have the last word...what we learn from them does.

I always tell parents to tell your kids of your bad choices, not just your good ones. For they need to know that what feels like bad choices need not be millstones that hold us hostage, but milestones that mark our growth. And the next generation needs our recovery stories to help them in their own recoveries.

And the scars become sacred because, though we will all die, our stories won't. They will out live us and help others live-out their lives.

The nail-scarred hands of Jesus say that wounds need not have the last word.

A second reason I would stand gazing is because it would have been easier to focus on what I've lost, than look around and discover what I still have.

I'm still mad at Jesus for leaving. It would have made my job a lot easier if he had stayed. Of course, if Jesus had stayed I probably would not have a job.

Think of all the questions we have about child rearing? Answer: Go ask Jesus. Think of all the questions about ethics, about off shore drilling? Go ask Jesus. Sexual orientation? War? Poverty? Health care? Immigration? Go ask Jesus.

But Jesus is no longer around to give a definitive answer that is loud enough for all the church to hear at one time.

So Jesus leaves us, but he leaves us with a gift. Maybe not the one we wanted, but it is the one we have. The gift God gives us...is us. Jesus leaves, and of all things, leaves us with ourselves.

And, oh yes, the Holy Spirit. That shy member of the Trinity that seems to either whisper too much or sit in silence too much.

He left us needing each other to survive and to thrive. Even the people we are different from, disagree with, have trouble getting along with.

Even the Apostle Paul didn't get into the church under his own curriculum vitae. Not just by Jesus' confrontation on the Damascus Road, but also by Barnabus' encouragement.

I remember times in my educational journey when I was ready to quit. Once when I was doing clinical work in a hospital and my supervisor put a hand on my shoulder and blessed me. Once when I was ready to give up on my doctrinal work and a Southern Baptist preacher and a Reformed Rabbi encouraged me. I've never forgotten it. I needed more than Jesus' nail-scarred hands...I needed the helping hands of others.

That's what Ascension Sunday gives us...not only the need to trust God, but the affirmation that God trusts us. That contrary to what we may think, God thinks that we are enough...that you are enough...that I am enough. Imagine that.

*These are some of the notes James Lamkin used while preaching Sunday morning's sermon.