



I will be the first to admit this Ascension story is not one of my favorites in Scripture, to say the least, because if we are not careful, we will be under the impression that our Lord ascended into the heavens and just stayed up there. That Jesus Christ is not down here anymore. That the Son is sitting at the right hand of the Father, and well, cannot possibly be on the heavenly throne and amongst our imperfect humanity, too. Now, hopefully, children of God can go along with the idea that Jesus is more than capable of being in multiple places at once. That the Messiah can

most certainly be in the heavens and on our ground level as well. That the Savior can even be with us Lutherans and Methodists and Presbyterians and Baptists and Catholics as we worship in different places throughout the world, and even with those who cannot make it into a church building this morning. Not to mention, amidst this holiday weekend: that Christ can be with those who are bravely willing to risk their very life in service for the place they call home, including for millions of people they will never meet, and still unbelievably willing to die for them.

And so, as our country takes time this weekend, especially tomorrow, to remember those who have died in battle and those whose lives we have lost long after their service in uniform concluded, we need to remember the story of a man named Lawrence Brooks. When he died earlier this year, he was the oldest American veteran of World War II, at the age of 112, to be exact, when he drew his final breath. He was one of fifteen children in his family. “Originally from Norwood, Louisiana, near Baton Rouge, the Brooks’ moved to the Mississippi Delta [while Lawrence was] an infant. He lived too far from the nearest school for him to attend, so his parents taught him what they could at home.” Soon enough, Brooks began working at a sawmill, and that is where he was when, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor was bombed, he was drafted into the Army.

Unfortunately, the reality of our nation’s history was that the military was still segregated. So, “Brooks spent his time during the war serving with the largely African American 91st Engineer Battalion, stationed in Australia, New Guinea and the Philippines. For [an extended duration], Brooks was a driver, valet and cook...He also helped build bridges, roads and airstrips. Eventually he earned the rank of Private 1st Class.”

Along the way, Private 1st Class Lawrence Brooks got to experience a glimpse of this Ascension story from Scripture, as he was part of “one flight to pick up supplies between Australia and New Guinea.” It’s almost as if he was near the very heavens of God’s throne as he looked down on the beauty of the Pacific Ocean, experiencing the magnificence of God’s Creation beneath him. However, as Brooks and other troops were up in the air, an engine died, and so they had to “throw...out cargo to compensate for the loss of power.” Thankfully, no one was hurt, and Lawrence returned to the ground level of this earth to continue his service on the other side of the Pacific.

Oddly enough, one of his greatest memories of his time in the Army was the most loving care and respect he received from the people of Australia, oftentimes much, much better treatment than he received from the place he called home, simply because of his skin color. And yet, for some reason, Private 1st Class Brooks insisted on serving his imperfect home. And when he was asked about how he pulled off living well over one hundred years, he said what is on the front cover of our bulletin this morning, taken from one of the vehicles that was part of his funeral procession: “Serve God and be nice to people,” even to those who do not seem interested in doing the same.

His life motto needs to be kept in mind when considering this Ascension story. After all, our Lord does not come down to the ground level of humanity just to show us the amazing extravagance of rising into the heavens; that his purpose was to show us how to get into that same heaven. No, our Risen Christ came to show us the beauty on this earth as well; that God is down here, too. And our Lord continues to show us how to, quite simply, “Serve God and be nice to people,” with a love and compassion and grace that Jesus emphatically insists is meant for all children of God, no questions asked. It is that same far-reaching kindness that Lawrence Brooks brought to life, who may be remembered this weekend for his military service, but long before that, he was a most precious child of God, the same God who is just as much down here as in the heavens. For, in the end, still, absolutely nothing can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. Yes, our Lord may have ascended into the heavens, but the truth is, he never, ever left us, and never, ever will. And for the Lawrence Brooks of the world who will never let us forget that Greatest News, including that God’s world is still worth dying for, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

“Lawrence N. Brooks, 112, Oldest American World War II Veteran, Dies” (The Associated Press, January 6, 2022)

“The Oldest Living American Veteran of World War II Dies at 112” (Vanessa Romo: National Public Radio Obituaries, January 5, 2022)