Easter 6 (A) – May 29, 2011 – Eve of Memorial Day
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
Acts 17:22-31
Sidetracked

Lt. Lopez would not be sidetracked. Known to most of the guys of the 1st Marines as the handsome "Lobo Lopez," he yelled at the top of his lungs, "Up and over, you've gotta get up and over!"

It was 5:35 PM on September 15, 1950. The men – or should I say the boys (as most were 16-18 years old) – of Third Platoon, A Company, the Third Battalion had run off the iron ramp of their LST onto the north end of Red Beach at Inchon, South Korea. Automatic weapons fire rained down on Lopez and his men as if they had been caught in a North Texas hailstorm. Worse, there was a logjam of petrified young Marines at the base of the 16-foot seawall. Cramped into a stretch of beach that was way too small, Lopez knew the slaughter of his rifle platoon was only seconds away. That's when Lobo Lopez said, "Give me that ladder, and follow me."

Climbing atop the pitiful scrap wood ladder that the Navy had nailed together on the voyage over from Japan, Lopez was on top of the seawall in seconds. Spying the concrete enemy bunker responsible for terrorizing his men with its Russian made 7.62 mm machine gun, the lieutenant pulled the pin on his grenade, sprung up and made a perfect throw into the narrow opening in the bunker. He had eliminated the first two obstacles for his men in less than 30 seconds. Lopez would not be sidetracked.

Obstacles had never slowed down Lobo. Ridiculed by many as the "Mexican boy", he got tired of telling his detractors that his family had emigrated to Florida from Spain not Mexico. Undeterred by cultural roadblocks, Lopez joined the Navy in 1943. A year later, he received an appointment to the Naval Academy. When graduating in 1948, he chose a commission in the Marine Corps rather than the Navy. Now he was part of the most daring naval landing in the history of warfare – the Inchon invasion. It was one most experts said would fail. If they had failed, the North Koreans would have swept the remaining American and U.N. forces into the Sea of Japan.

"Come on," Lopez yelled at the slow moving jarheads at the base of the ladder. Then spying another bunker spewing automatic weapon fire, Lopez pulled the pin of a second grenade, rose up, and fearlessly charged the bunker. He was shot first in his right shoulder and then 7.62 rounds riddled his chest and abdomen. The dashing 23 year-old lost his grip on the grenade and it bounced toward the top of the seawall just where his men were clamoring up the ladder. Bleeding profusely and unable to stand, Lopez drug himself to the grenade in order to throw it away, yet he could not grasp it with his fingers. So, with his last remaining strength, he swept the grenade under his chest just in time to smother the blast. The lives of 12 Marines were spared and in less than 20 minutes Red Beach was secured by those who were earlier frozen at the bottom of the seawall. The liberation of Seoul and the rescue of thousands could not be sidetracked.

"For exceptional courage, fortitude, and devotion to duty" the citation read. Handsome Lobo Lopez was posthumously awarded the Korean War's first Medal of Honor.[1]

As surprising as it may sound on the Eve of Memorial Day, Lt. Lopez's determined march through life to death is the journey that must be undertaken by every Christian. That's the undeniable message of the Acts of the Apostles.

Using a broad stroke, I would say the centerpiece of Acts records the path of Paul's astonishing conversion in chapter 9 and then maps his subsequent thousands of miles of arduous and frenzied missionary travels in chapters 13-20. But here's the most striking point: Acts reserves all of chapters 21-28 to document Paul's long march to death in Rome. That's eight chapters examining Paul's life and ministry and seven fully devoted to his march toward death. Luke, the author of Acts, pays as much attention to Paul's death as he does to his life. That seems rather startling, if not downright morbid – that is unless we take into accord Luke's earlier work, the Gospel of Luke. In that volume, Luke spends the first nine chapters primarily recalling Jesus' ministry in Galilee. However, at 9:51, the story takes a sharp turn. "When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up," writes Luke, "Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem." Any hint of triumphalism in the Gospel is muted as the text takes on a much more somber tone for the next fifteen chapters. Leading his twelve disciples, Jesus is resolute about keeping his appointment with death. Like that 23 year-old lieutenant striking off in front of the thirty men of his rifle platoon, Jesus will not be <u>sidetracked</u>.

So, we should be less surprised that in Acts we find the same intransigence in Paul. At most, seven years after his debate with the illuminati of Athens, Luke reports, "Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia, and Achaia, and then go onto Jerusalem. Paul asserts, 'After I have gone there, I must also go to Rome'" **(Acts 19:21)**. No amount of begging, weeping, or dark prophecies will deter Paul from his fateful journey **(Acts 20:36-38; 21:10-14)**. Paul, like his Lord, refuses to be <u>sidetracked</u>.

I think Paul's verbal duel with the learned in the august city of Athens, Greece gives us some insight as to why Paul is so intent on continuing his trek to Jerusalem and Rome, which anyone knows will end in his death. Paul first gets the assent of the noble Athenians gathered there at the Areopagus or Mars Hill, as it is often termed, when he declares the evidence for God the Father in the creation and sustaining of the natural order. And just to "ice the cake", Paul quotes a couple of their celebrated ancient poets **(Acts 17:22-29)**. Now that he has captured their attention and won their approval, Paul crashes the party by telling them that this entire world God has made – everyone and everything – is under judgment from the One – Jesus – who marched willingly to death but whom God the Father has now raised **(Acts 17:30)**. In other words, we must live with the same singular purpose as Jesus. We don't set Jesus on the mantle piece as a static symbol of our faith; no, we must follow in his steps toward ultimate meaning in our lives as well as our deaths.

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[1] Bill Sloan, <u>The Darkest Summer</u> (NY:Simon and Shuster, 2009), 241-244.

Paul, who has discovered this existential fact, is indignant when his friends at Caesarea – his last stop before Jerusalem – try to restrain him from continuing toward his death. "What are you doing," he says, "weeping and breaking my heart. For I am ready not only to be bound but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" **(Acts 21:13)**.

The temptation is to turn Paul into some kind of super hero of the Christian faith. Instead, we should consider him as a guide. The more deadly parts of our life's journey holds the key to finding our purpose. I was dramatically reminded of this truth when I sat next to a young soldier of the 82nd Airborne on a flight to Memphis Wednesday. Only 30 years old, the young man has served in Iraq, Afghanistan, the DMZ between North and South Korea, Panama, and Germany. He has made enough parachute jumps to qualify as a Jump Master and he has completed twelve HALO jumps – high altitude from the upper atmosphere. His best friends have died in combat and some others have returned home to take their own life. Yet this young E-7 looked across at me while wiping tears from his eyes and confessed that this was his most painful journey. He would see his wife and his three children for the first time in 16 months. The long absences magnified terribly by the flashbacks and horrific mood swings has terribly wounded his marriage such that his wife has asked for a divorce.

This highly decorated airborne soldier was resolute in going to his wife's side, asking for forgiveness, and showing her that he has changed. With only five years before retirement after the end of his enlistment, he will offer to leave the service for a higher purpose – his family. Armed with this painfully gained knowledge of himself, he will not be <u>sidetracked</u> in his quest. I looked at him in awe, for I was nothing close to him at 30.

I am fully aware that my words this morning may strike you are way too dark for a bright Sunday morning when the barbecue awaits. But here's the heart of Luke's message and St. Paul's and Lt. Lopez's and SFC Moldorado's to us: *If we have not yet discovered that for which we would die, are we really living?*