

“The Invitation of 9/12”
Mark 15:42-16:2

Yesterday marked twenty years. It has now been two decades since September 11 became more than simply another day on the calendar and since nine-backslash-eleven became shorthand for a culture-altering moment. For those who lived through that day, it is hard to imagine it has been that long, yet one indication of the passage of time is the fact that virtually all of today’s college students were born after 9/11 or are too young to have memories of it. For them, it has become something like the Kennedy assassination or attack on Pearl Harbor; a moment older relatives may discuss, but otherwise just another topic in their American history class.

For those who experienced it first-hand, though, either through the death of loved ones that day or a shared time of shock and fear from afar, it remains one of those defining moments in our journeys--of life prior to and since. Thus, like many of you, I have spent time in recent days reading articles and watching specials about 9/11 and remembering how it unfolded. Even yesterday’s weather with its clear skies and hint of fall matched the actual moment.

The most meaningful retrospective I saw was a documentary on Apple TV that recounted 9/11 from the perspective of President George W. Bush and those who traveled with him that day. It offered behind-the-scenes videos and photos of the President’s early morning jog and that iconic moment he is sitting in a classroom when his chief of staff whispers in his ear, “American is under attack.” One sees his frustration when the Secret Service will not allow him to return to Washington immediately and the activity leading up to and following his televised speech that evening from the Oval Office. It included a few light moments such as the phone call made to his parents. They were in Milwaukee and he asked, “Why are you in Milwaukee?” and his mother said, “Because you grounded our plane!” The film offered some tidbits I had not known or had forgotten of how there were threats against Air Force One as the President traveled and how the secure room in the White House literally began to run out of oxygen because so many officials had gathered there. It was fascinating to hear insights of the former President and Vice-President, cabinet members and journalists with him throughout. Yet the most enduring comment for me came from then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice who said, “we saw evil that day.”

We did, yet today is September 12. The 9/11 observances have largely ended and a new week has begun. Still, on this twentieth anniversary plus one day, we have gathered for worship and thus I would like for us to ponder together this question: how do we continue to honor the courage and sacrifice and lessons of that day? In other words, how do we best mark 9/12?

Our Biblical text has something to suggest. Mark’s account, of course, does not recall a time when 3000 innocent people died, but only one. It does not tell of the bravery of law enforcement and fire fighters and other first responders who went toward danger, but instead of many who fled. Nor does it recount events known instantly around the globe as knowledge of what happened in Jerusalem that day spread slowly over the millennia. Yet that Scriptural account does describe a time when a group of believers felt as if their world had come crashing down; when their dreams seemingly had been stopped by evil, and what a few of them did next.

Our narrative begins on that Friday evening in Jerusalem. In the blur of hours that preceded our text, Jesus had shared in a final meal with the disciples, been betrayed by one of his own and arrested, dragged through a succession of trials and false accusations, and condemned by a crowd. As he hung on the cross, soldiers cast lots for his clothes and others ridiculed him, until finally he breathed his last. The narrator records that three women watched those horrific events from afar: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome.

Our account begins at that point as Mark tell us when evening comes, Joseph of Arimathea “went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” Why was it bold? Because Joseph was part of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council who had ensured Jesus would die and thus that man’s future would be forever changed by his words. Pilate granted the request and Joseph takes the body, wraps it in linen, places it in a tomb, and rolls a stone over its entry. The two Marys see Jesus’ final resting place, but then the day ends. Their own 9/11 is over, but as faithful Jews, they rested all of the next day in observing a Sabbath now marked by grief.

The timing of events on Friday had not permitted the body to be prepared for burial so Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome acquire the needed spices for that final act of devotion. “And very early on the first day of the week,” Mark says “when the sun has risen, they went to the tomb.” They find it empty and soon word of what has occurred spreads, but we stop here because I believe their actions reveal how we best respond on September 12.

As thankfully, you and I don’t have to face many moments that rise to the emotional level or perhaps more accurately, descend to the emotional depths, of the day Jesus was crucified or the day we call 9/11. Yet we all have moments along the way when the world as we know it is altered dramatically. When a loved one dies or when a dream is shattered, when a betrayal becomes known or when a career unexpectedly halts. Whatever the specifics, in such moments the sensation can be the same—a stunned sense that our world has changed, confusion as to what it all means, and the natural question of what we are to do next. That’s what 9/12 is all about, in the first century and twenty-first, and what four people of long ago demonstrated.

As Joseph and those three women couldn’t undo the horror that had resulted in Jesus death, but they could still carry out the everyday acts of compassion and humanity needed in the moment. They could not change what had occurred and did not know that life would soon be forever altered by a resurrection, but they responded to evil even so by doing what they could.

Eric Adams is the Democratic nominee for mayor of New York City. In a recent article that focused on the question of whether New Yorkers will return to the city as the pandemic begins to ease, he spoke about the events from twenty years ago. Adams was a uniformed NYPD officer on 9/11, a lieutenant in Brooklyn’s 88th Precinct. He was working election duty when he saw the Twin Towers crumble. “That night I went down there and saw how devastating it was to all of us,” he said, but there’s “something else that a lot of people don’t acknowledge, and that’s 9/12. To me, 9/12 is the most significant part of this journey.” On that day, “the day after, we got up. New Yorkers got up. Teachers taught. Builders continued to build. We said that we’re not going to crumble.” A city that “went through 9/11 and recovered can go through Covid and recover... We have the resiliency. We’re going to continue to move forward.” (Varadarajan, Tunko “Will New York Come Back? Will New Yorkers?” *The Wall Street Journal*, 9/3/21)

How do we best respond to the horror of events from twenty years ago? How do we honor those who died that day and those who continue to bear the impact of those losses? Certainly, we continue to stop and mark their sacrifice and support those who work so hard still to keep us safe. Just as definitively, we keep telling the stories from that day to the generations born since so they will know that part of our nation’s history and its ongoing impact on us all.

Yet the other invitation of 9/12 is to keep living in all of its ordinariness. To keep doing our homework and keep planning tomorrow’s sales calls. To keep protecting little ones and keep listening to our elders. To keep offering deeds of compassion and keep mowing the grass, keep writing our legislators and keep washing dishes, keep gathering for worship and yes, keep presenting babies for baptism because in those everyday deeds we proclaim that while we saw

evil twenty years ago yesterday, evil never has the final word. And instead, that in life and death we belong to God, on this September the 12th and in all the other days to come.