



The Invitation of 9/13

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First Lesson | Joshua 4:19-24

The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. Those twelve stones that they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, saying to the Israelites, “When your children ask their parents in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever.”

Second Lesson | Mark 15:42-16:1

When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead, and summoning the centurion he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted

the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth and, taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.



Sermon

As a high school student, I took a French class all four years. There was more than one teacher at Hardaway High, but Mr. Robinson was my only instructor. Thus, he taught me about conjugating verbs and formal vs. informal pronouns, key phrases, and vocabulary. I remember some of those lessons, yet the most enduring memory has nothing to do with the language.

During my freshman year, I came to class one December morning. After the group had quieted down, Mr. Robinson stood

and, with a somber look, asked if any of us knew the significance of the day. I don't recall that anyone did, and thus, with a deep sigh, he began to talk about the events of Pearl Harbor some 31 years before and its impact upon him and our country.

That wasn't a one-time event, as during my sophomore year it happened again on the same day. Thus, by the time I was in French IV, it was widely known that we didn't have to complete assignments due on that day, even though December 7 fell on a Sunday that year—and I looked it up—someone in class raised their hand at the start of class on Monday and said, “Wasn't yesterday Pearl Harbor Day, Mr. Robinson?” We then put down our pencils and let him begin to talk. I would like to say that the question was the result of genuinely being interested in hearing more of his remembrances, but truth be told, it had become a surefire way for us to obtain a free hour of not having to take any notes. I feel bad about that ploy now, as it wasn't until 25 years ago that I came to understand the kind of event he had been describing.

September 11 is that kind of day for us. Anyone in this room who is older than

30 carries vivid memories of where they were when first learning of the horror taking place at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and in Shanksville. One member of BMPC survived the attack on the South Tower. His artwork graces our bulletin cover this morning and the Gallery, too. Another member lost a son-in-law who died on the 105th floor of the North Tower, leaving behind her daughter and two grandchildren under the age of 10. Yet another was called in as part of the forensics teams after the crash of United Airlines Flight 93. Stories fill our minds and hearts.

Yet for many people in this room and others that we know and love, 9/11 evokes no personal memories. 31% of Americans are 25 or younger. 67% of today's college students have not reached their 26th birthday either. Thus, for a growing number, 9/11 is an event like Pearl Harbor: found in history textbooks, but in need of being described by those who lived through it, too. Both of our Biblical texts this morning encourage such conversations

The first tells of a day Joshua had successfully led the Israelites into the land of Canaan. The crossing occurred

at the Jordan River and is described in the verses prior to our reading. God had told Joshua to have priests pick up the Ark of the Covenant and walk toward the river. When their feet touched the water, it parted, and the priests went forward and stood in the middle of the riverbed while the people crossed over. Once all had done so, Joshua sent 12 men back to select 12 stones from the middle. With those stones, Joshua formed a circle and placed it in the middle of the river, as an enduring memorial, much as the U.S.S. Arizona silently does so at Pearl Harbor today. When he completed that task, the priests finished the crossing and water returned.

It is then that our text begins as Joshua says to the people, “When your children ask their parents in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.’” He tells them that those events will be a reminder of what God had done for their ancestors forty years earlier at the Red Sea, too. The stones, Joshua says, will help them remember that event “so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, and so that you may fear the LORD your God forever.”

Joshua was naming a process that has occurred ever since the first generation of humans walked this earth; telling those who came after what had happened in the past. In his case, he was speaking of their faith history, and that is certainly part of the charge of all Christians still: to tell the generation that follows what it means to follow Jesus Christ and encourage them to do the same. Yet Joshua was also naming that broader task of one generation preparing the next one. It is what we do throughout life, and on 9/13, too, we must decide what we will tell and how.

For me, one of the most enduring memories is how our nation came together. I picture members of Congress on the steps of the U.S. Capitol singing “God Bless America.” I remember the headlines of a Paris newspaper the day after the attack that read “Nous sommes tous Américains” or “We are all Americans.” On the Sunday after 9/11, this congregation and ones across the country were filled as people needed a word of hope. There was a unity and shared resolve then, unlike any I had experienced before, and 25 years later, I lament how it has faded.

Whatever story you have to tell, it is your account about those events that the next generation needs to hear. That's part of the invitation of 9/13.

Our second Biblical lesson adds to our message. 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 firefighters 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.

Our narrative begins on that Friday evening. In the blur of hours that preceded it, Jesus had shared a final meal with the disciples, been betrayed by one of his own, arrested, dragged through a succession of trials, 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 Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, watched from a distance.

Our account begins at that point as Mark tells us when evening draws near, 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. Joseph's reputation would be forever changed by his ask. Pilate granted the request, and Joseph took the body, wrapped it in linen, placed it in a tomb, and rolled a stone over its entrance. The two women see Jesus' final resting place, but then the day ends. Their own 9/11 is over, but as faithful Jews, they rested 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 the two Marys and Salome acquired 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

at that point in the narrative because I believe their actions reveal another invitation of September 13.

Thankfully, you and I don't have to face many moments that rise to the emotional height or, 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 hard diagnosis is received, when a betrayal becomes known or when a job unexpectedly ends. 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 means, and a question of what we are to do next. That's what 9/13 is about, too.

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 needed. They could not change the facts regarding what had occurred and did not know that life would soon be altered by a resurrection, but they responded to evil by doing what they could. We can, too.

Eric Adams is a former mayor of New York City. In an article five years ago that focused on whether New Yorkers would return to the city once the COVID pandemic began to ease, he spoke about the events of twenty years earlier. 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-five 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 9/13 is to keep living life in all of its ordinary ways. To keep doing our homework and keep planning tomorrow's sales calls. To keep protecting little ones and keep caring for aging parents. To keep offering a listening ear and keep mowing the grass, keep writing our legislators and keep going to the gym, keep gathering for worship, and yes, keep celebrating Rally Day because in those everyday deeds and others like them we proclaim that while we saw evil twenty-five years ago Thursday, evil never has the final word.

And instead, that in life and death we belong to God: on September 11th, 2001, on September 13th, 2026, and all the days to come.

