

Twenty years ago, yesterday, I was making my way into the parking deck of the SunTrust Building in Atlanta, Georgia. As I descended the winding ramps of concrete and steel to find an open space, the DJ on my car radio announced that a plane had crashed into one of the World Trade Center towers. By the time I got off the elevator and entered my office, another plane had struck the second tower. I huddled around a television in the lobby with coworkers as we watched the aftermath unfold on CNN, and wondered how to make sense of it all. Twenty years later, we're still seeking to make sense of it all.

9/11 was the first event in my lifetime where one moment affected the collective fate of our nation, and indeed our world. My parents and grandparents would often talk about remembering exactly where they were when they heard the news of Pearl Harbor, or Hiroshima, or the Kennedy Assassination. How each of these events shaped a pre and post reality of the world.

These events reveal the complexities of human existence: we are created, all of us, in God's good and loving image, and yet evil, and violence, and grief, and tragedy, and despair are still present. There's also a reminder of humanity's great endurance, and God's consistent presence and healing.

9/11 exposed our nation's vulnerabilities; the most protected, most advanced, most fortified country in the world with the most significant military presence ever known, was not immune to acts of terror. Mid-century ideals of nation-building and capital-infusion created prosperity here at home, and insulated us from the chaos and uncertainty sown by evil agents. At least the most visible ones. But our prosperity and insulation also created imbalance abroad.

Global neighbors in faraway lands did not experience the prosperity of the post-war era. Their hurt and desperation, infused with ideological differences, and grievances against us, some real, some perceived, festered into radicalism and violence. Thousands of Americans lost their lives in a single day; their loved ones still grieve. Millions more still seek to process the trauma they witnessed firsthand. And many thousands more Americans became the targets of our own rage, grief, and fear, because they had different names, and different customs, and worshiped in other houses of faith, and it could mean they might be terrorists, too. A war in Afghanistan has drained resources, and patience, and sacrificed too many lives, and left more questions than answers. And there's a guardedness that didn't exist before: the spaces we occupy, the places we go, the information we keep, the planning we do, the relationships we forge...they all have a built-in watchfulness that didn't exist on 9/10/01.

There is of course the best of humanity, too. Our first responders epitomized selflessness, bravery, and valor. New York persevered, becoming a haven of empathy and collaboration in the days that followed. Ground Zero has been renewed and rebuilt in the same way life returns after a devastating storm. And for a time, people really did seek to search for the humanity in their neighbors. *Saturday Night Live* even gave us permission to laugh again.

I believe this is a weekend where we should mourn a senseless, unspeakable tragedy, and where we should do all we can to honor the lives of those whom we have lost, and especially of those first-responders who acted so selflessly in the most dire of circumstances. And we should offer our gratitude, and honor all of those people who

work hard every day to keep us safe. I think we should give thanks for persistence, and strength, and endurance, for there is hope in such things.

But I also pray that we, as individuals, and as a nation, will reflect on a culture whose ideals keep calling us to be THE BEST, and to have THE MOST. In our desire to set ourselves apart as exemplar, we often fail to become the best of what God intends for us to be, and to give the most of what God intends for us to give. Our best is not the privileged pillar of isolationism; our most is not the amassing of great wealth. Our best is the table of partnership and collaboration; our most is the sharing of our gifts to meet human need. Too often we trade the authentic peace and security of our Creator for the artificial peace and security of our systems. Our salvation, our redemption, our fulfilment is not in the maintenance of systems; it's in God.

This morning, I am thankful beyond measure to live in a land that offers us economic, political, and military security, as well as personal freedoms. But I pray that we will keep working for a world where we don't need such systems to ensure our own security and that of our neighbors as well.

And yikes, that was more than 800 words, and not one mention of our text. But I promise it's coming. I believe that for the writer of Mark, and really all of the gospel writers, the resurrection is THE profound moment of history. It changes everything. Once you've experienced a post resurrection world you can never experience the world in the same way again.

If we're not careful, or if we are lazy in reading today's lection, we can hear this business of cross-bearing and suffering as predetermined and predestined. This good, peaceful, loving imaginative Creator of ours concluded there was a simple fix for the corruption of the world. Jesus must meet the cross, suffer a humiliating death, and in so doing atone for corporate sin. Because, surely, that's the best, and most complete, and most humane path of redemption that the most complex being in the universe can conjure, right? Yeah, that doesn't make much sense to me, either.

I choose to be more measured in my interpretation of the gospels. Jesus fully devoted himself to the love of God and neighbor. When someone makes that choice, and expresses and lives out that choice publicly, vocally, and consistently, and does so under Roman occupation, sooner or later, they will be at odds with the systems of this world. And sooner or later, the empire will strike back. It's not that God concocted the cross as a redemptive path for humanity. It's that Jesus chose an ultimate allegiance to God, and in so doing, willingly and ultimately subjected himself to the rejection of the powers that be. And God's lasting and resurrecting hope stands in stark contrast to Caesar's fleeting and puny cruelty.

For if you have lived in God's enough-ness, if you have recognized your full value as God's beloved, what hold does this world have on you?

Fast forward seventy to eighty years, and Mark's author is seeking to make sense of this world-changing resurrection in an era every bit as volatile as the days following 9/11. In a world feeling the crushing, dehumanizing nature of Rome's brutality, how can Jesus followers find hope? For our author, Peter's character expresses the desire, felt by so

many throughout the ages, for God's justice to be manifested in a re-tinkering of human systems. Peter isn't so much concerned about the world order, as much as he is about his status in it. Peter, living in a pre-resurrection world, believes Jesus' role is to reclaim human systems in God's name. Jesus is trying to tell Peter, and you and me as well, that he has come to help humanity reclaim God in a way that transcends our human systems. Jesus is helping us shift our dependence, our very existence away from tired systems and back toward God.

Pain, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, doubt...all of these things are part of the human experience. Oppressive systems, in every age, seek to deflect these things. The hard parts of life can be resisted with power, forced onto neighbors who are more vulnerable. Rome's cross seeks to be a symbol of its dominance over every aspect of the human experience.

But none of these things exist in a vacuum. It's not pressure or force that eliminates these darker elements of living. We also experience hope, faith, love, kindness, humor, inner strength, and joy. We overcome our pain, our anger, our grief when we are met with love, and kindness, and care. Rome commands that the many bear all the pain to ensure the prosperity of the few. God chooses to be present with us, to see us through the pain.

Caesar asks you to deny your humanity in order that you might alleviate your anxiety. Jesus tells us that when we deny our humanity, we're not really living.

Jim Valvano, in the final stages of his cancer journey remarked, “Cancer can take my life, but it can never take my mind, and my heart, and my soul.” The body is simply the vessel of what lives.

Jesus had a heart, soul, and mind rooted in God. He refused to live in world that would deny him such an expression, even if there was a cross to bear. Because for Jesus, to suppress his humanity, to ignore his rootedness and calling in God, was to forfeit his very essence.

If we choose to follow Jesus, we too will have a cross to bear, and an obligation to deny ourselves the lure of worldly systems. In most instances, our cross will not be as brutal as the one Jesus and other martyrs had to endure, but it won't be without discomfort. We experience a present certainty in the spaces we occupy, and even the uneasy certainties offer kind of comfort. Jesus asks us to give up such certainties, and in so doing brave alienation from the familiar. But in that uncomfortable leap is life.

9/11 forced us into a recalibration. We have made changes and adjustments to exist in a newer, safer, reality. And there's not a day that goes by when we don't consider or reflect on those choices and changes.

I wonder what would happen if we chose to make the resurrection story a similar line of demarcation in our lives? Resurrection is the reality that light is not overcome by darkness, that death is not the final word, that God is indeed invested in this world with us, that life is known in heart, and soul, and mind, forever. Would such a mindset free us to finally be secure in ourselves, and to ultimately secure a better world?

A Lot Can Happen in a Moment
Bob Stillerman
Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 19, 9/12/2021
Mark 8:27-38



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May God give us the strength to remember the moments in each of our lives where there are crosses to bear. And may the bearing of such crosses free us to be secure, and confident, and safe in the arms of a loving God. And may our renewed love for one another finally bring about the purposeful world God intends for all of creation to experience. May it be so, and may it begin in our living, right now. Amen.