

Proper 19 B September 12, 2021
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

World Changing Events
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

For my parents, it was probably the assassination of then president of the United States, John F. Kennedy. Or maybe, it was the day two Americans walked on the surface of the moon for the first time. For my grandparents, it was most likely the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. For my generation, it was September 11, 2001 – the day of the worst terrorist attack on America - when for the first time I experienced the sensation of everything stopping and realized that when everything started again things will have changed. For others the first time you experienced that sensation might have been about 18 months ago when like other universities, schools, churches and businesses, Ohio University closed its doors and sent everyone away because of the Covid-19 pandemic. While there may be a few folks here who can remember all these events, there is something about the first time we experience a historic event that begins a change in the world and impacts pretty much all individual lives.

I remember listening to my grandparents talk about where they were and how they learned about the bombing of Pearl Harbor and all the feelings they had. They knew their lives were about to change. And their lives did change. Both of my grandfathers and one of my grandmothers joined the military and served during World War II. I wasn't alive for any of the moon walks, but I never tired of listening to my parents talk about how they stayed up late to watch that first one, how it filled them with hopeful expectations for the future. I also listened when they talked about where they were and how they learned about the assassination of President Kennedy and how the loss was so deep it was felt throughout the country and the world. The grief lingered and influenced many lives like those working at NASA who endeavored to realize Kennedy's goal to put an American on the moon before the end of the 1960's. There is something powerful and personal about listening to someone's memories of an historical event that is often missing from history books. Whenever I listened to my elders share such memories, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to live through a major event that would change the world. I got my chance twenty years ago when I watched the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon on television and later learned of the passengers of a plane that prevented the third target from being hit. When I talk with people about September 11, 2001, I tell them what I remember more than the images on

the television, is the silence. For several weeks there were no airplanes flying in the sky and that created an eerie quiet even in my small hometown in Wisconsin. The silence extended for weeks and was felt by businesses. I sat in the small independent bookstore where I worked as manager on Main Street, day after day and looked out at an empty street. No one went shopping. At Target a week after the tragedy, there were maybe six of us in the entire store. Americans had instituted a self-imposed lock down in response to the terrorist attack. When people finally started shopping again, we discovered it was difficult to get inventory because New York City is a hub in the publishing world, and they were busy were cleaning up. It was months before they started shipping goods out again. It took my bookstore two years to recover financially from the lack of business experienced in just a few weeks.

A friend of mine had a different memory. Twenty years ago, today he got called to go to New York and serve as a chaplain for the rescue workers. He was an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church and worked with the FBI. Like many rescue workers, he worked out of Trinity Episcopal Church on Wall Street. He spent days just listening to people, praying with people, and helping the people of New York City through the grief of trauma. Years later he developed symptoms of a lung disease that despite a lung transplant eventually took his life. But I never heard him complain. He was not ashamed to live the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me."

In the conversations I have these days, people are much more likely to tell me about the relative they lost to Covid-19, or a relative who survived the virus but has long term side effects. Or how the pandemic has changed their education, or job, or families, or outlook on life; sometimes for the better, sometimes not.

No matter our age, we all have experienced an event that is so big, it not only changed *our* world, but it also changed *the whole world*. Even if we are familiar with other such events in history, it is much different when we find ourselves living through them. That is when we realize it can take a long time to process, understand, and adapt to these events and the changes they bring. Because it can feel like we've lost the only world we know.

For the disciples who followed Jesus this world changing event was Jesus' death and resurrection. As much as modern Christians might be familiar with the story, they were events that were challenging to understand and process.

Remember every version of the resurrection in the four Gospels has the disciples hiding, terrified, and devastated by Jesus' death. No one expected Jesus to be raised. When the first witnesses at the tomb experienced the Risen Jesus, they were frightened and confused. And when those witnesses went and told the disciples that they had seen Jesus the disciples didn't believe them. Even after the Risen Jesus appeared to them in-person, the disciples still didn't grasp what the presence of the Risen Jesus means. The world had changed. Nothing would ever be the same. But living into that change would not be simple or easy. It still isn't. Because it does feel like the world has been lost, making it difficult to see the life on the other side of loss Jesus promises and gives through his resurrection that he talks about in today's Gospel.

That could very well be why all four of the Gospels have a moment where the narrative of Jesus' ministry turns from miracles and parables to Jesus teaching that he is going to die and rise again, like we heard in Mark's Gospel just a moment ago. Today's Gospel lesson is a turning point, it turns from what Jesus did to pointing to who Jesus is and what makes Jesus who he says he is by pointing to the cross and resurrection.

We read Jesus had a bit of a conversation with his disciples asking first who do people say he is and then asking who they think he is. This is the first time someone identified Jesus as the Messiah in Mark's Gospel. To be called the Messiah was a big deal. The author of Mark's Gospel seems to have Jesus respond to this revelation by teaching what it means to be the Messiah. It doesn't mean starting a mega church with hundreds of thousands of members, expensive programs, multiple music groups, and a multi-million-dollar budget. It doesn't mean gathering and training an army of humans and angels to violently combat the Roman military for governing power. It means being obedient to God because the Messiah is God's spokesperson. It means being obedient to God because the Messiah reconciles humanity to God and mediates God's forgiveness. It means being obedient to God because the Messiah represents God as God's Son and ruler of God's Kingdom present here on earth. To say Jesus is the Messiah is to say God is somehow present through the person, words, and actions of Jesus.

Jesus lived this obedience to God even when he was betrayed, tortured, and died a cruel, humiliating death. Which had to have been traumatic to his followers. And when it must have felt like their world had stopped turning, when for them an eerie silence like the one I remember from twenty years ago, fell

around them throbbing with the absence of Jesus, Mary Magdalene came barging in to say Jesus has indeed risen. Which means if they thought his death had changed the world, they hadn't seen anything yet. It was hard for them to believe. Even though they had been with Jesus every step of the way. It was hard for those first followers to accept and trust resurrection life. Even after the Risen Jesus stood among them.

It wasn't until they had some help from the Holy Spirit that the disciples were able to catch up to the resurrection and adapt to the change it brought to the world. They began to live that resurrection life in the world by what they said and did. They started communities that became the Church. They took in the people society at the time threw away: orphaned children, women who had no property or family to care for them, those who had failed and were not given second chances by society. The disabled, disfigured, whomever didn't fit the desired social criteria. The followers of Jesus talked about his death and resurrection and welcomed others who wanted to live this new way: the Resurrection life that embodies the forgiveness of God, that lives a life with God at the center, a life that doesn't insist on its own way but does insist on God's way.

It's still not easy to do or even to imagine how to live that resurrection life today. But all the world changing events from the past or the one that we are living through can offer opportunities to look for where the Holy Spirit is calling us to live that resurrection life. Sometimes we can. Like my friend who grabbed a bag and went to New York on September 12, 2001. Sometimes we don't do so well. Another memory I have from twenty years ago is how churches of every denomination and every other house of worship for every religion in every town and city were more full than usual the first Sunday after the terrorist attack. But they weren't ready for all the people. How could they be? The clergy and regular attenders were still grappling with the trauma of 9/11 and sometimes it gives comfort to ignore the feelings that there hasn't been time to process and just proceed with business or liturgy as usual. We can't imagine more people coming to church at a time like that. So, there weren't enough worship bulletins for all the people in churches that day. Most sermons or reflections preached that day did not mention the feelings people were struggling to process or suggested how to respond to those feelings. There were very few special prayers that day for the dead, the lost, the grieving, or the rescue workers. Most organists did not change the hymns they had selected and prepared months before. There wasn't much

discussion on how Christians might respond to the attack, and little discernment for where the Holy Spirit was calling us. So, it shouldn't be as surprising as it was that the following Sunday those same churches, synagogues, temples, mosques were even less full than they had been before 9/11. Sometimes we expect too much, too easy of answers for deeply complex issues too soon. Sometimes we are disappointed and seek comfort other places. Sometimes it is hard to see resurrection life or even have the strength or heart to look for it, especially when we are focused on human things like Jesus mentioned in the Gospel.

But today, I can see how the church has changed. Most parishes are more likely to include recent events that are distressing or disheartening in prayers and perhaps sermons. We are more likely to admit when we are hurting with our community. Our music ministers are far more likely to change hymns, even if they aren't as well practiced. I also notice more Episcopal clergy and parishes are more active in interfaith groups as we seek to understand and love each other in seeking common ground and serve together for common good. We might not have been able to discern right away, but we did eventually lift our hearts to the Holy Spirit and at least try to adapt and go where God is calling us.

I was recently asked by several different people about the value in remembering September 11, 2001. Especially in light of our military personnel, some of whom have spent most of their lives over the past twenty years fighting a war that began that day, are returning home. And we want to be welcoming and supportive of refugees from Afghanistan who are leaving because they are in danger for helping our country during that war. We don't want to inadvertently stir up anger or distrust. There is enough of that already.

Yet, I believe there still is value in remembering, especially when we remember how we did or did not respond to the historic events with resurrection life. Did we change? Did we seek to recognize the Risen Jesus and follow him? Or were we too taken with human things like comfort, power, anger, vengeance?

Perhaps the value in practicing this type of remembering is that we can apply it to the historic time we are living in now. I know you are weary of the pandemic. Everyone is. I know there is disappointment the current surge of new cases of covid-19 could prevent activities you are looking forward to. I understand the desire to pretend it isn't happening, that is just another human thing to do. But we could look beyond those human things to that resurrection life that is tingling all around us. The Holy Spirit hasn't abandoned us. There are ways we can adapt, we can change. That change doesn't have to be perceived as

a failure. It could be recognized as a life-giving gift from God. It might also be perceived as that same obedience of Jesus, who implores us to take up our cross and follow him, to seek not the human things of the world but the resurrection that gives hope to the world even when it is changing.