

June 2, 2019
Galilee, Virginia Beach, VA
7th Easter (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Almost regardless of who you are and where you were on Friday afternoon, the last two days have been difficult for the people of Hampton Roads and particularly for the people of Virginia Beach. Unfortunately and all too often we have seen innocent lives being taken in the way they were taken at the Municipal Center on Friday.

It seems almost commonplace; almost commonplace until it touches your life. Then it becomes very, very personal. It has become personal because these twelve persons are our Hampton Roads neighbors:

Laquita C. Brown
Ryan Keith Cox
Tara Welch Gallagher
Mary Louise Gayle
Alexander Mikhail Gusev
Joshua Hardy
Michelle 'Missy' Langer
Richard H. Nettleton
Katherine A. Nixon
Christopher Kelly Rapp
Robert 'Bobby' Williams
Herbert 'Bert' Snelling

Since Friday afternoon across our city and in our region a plethora of difficult questions have been asked by survivors. One of the most prominent questions is to ask why this happened. Why did an obsessed man senselessly murder these twelve persons. It is as if we could figure out a reason for the senseless violence that all would be okay. If but we could find the root cause, then we could move on with our lives and all would be normal again.

Yet, will finding the root cause of why our twelve neighbors were killed enable us to return to the old normal and continue life as usual? Knowing the reason might help us to avert the next crisis, but is the answer to why the key to returning to normal?

There is bad news and there is good news.

First the bad news: It is highly improbable that we will ever be able to return to the old normal. No, probably not ever.

The good news is that as people of faith, we've been here before. A new normal awaits us.

Everything I know about the mindset of the disciples in the immediate days after Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried indicate to me that the disciples would have liked nothing better than for the old normal to return. Though I am sure that they had ideas about how they would live out Jesus' mission, I seriously doubt that the devastation of being permanently separated from Jesus was not part of their plan. For a couple of days the disciples experienced a new normal of grief and loss that, I dare say, was a new normal that none of them liked or desired. For a couple of days between the darkness of Jesus death on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday Jesus' followers hid away and were feeling as though they were stuck in an overwhelming loop of sadness and loss tinged with feelings of nostalgia for the good old days with Jesus.

Yet on Sunday all that changed, at least for a short season of life it changed. When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection once again they had the opportunity to be close to the one they loved; the one who had senselessly and cruelty taken from them through death upon a cross. This was awkward. Jesus had already begun to say their goodbye to the disciples.

In the gospel lesson just read Jesus was addressing his followers for the last great time. He was preparing his followers for the time when no longer would he be with them. Jesus' passionate words to them were to give his followers encouragement and a sense of hope that he would always be with them, though not with them in the way they were used to having him with them. This was the beginning of Jesus' goodbye to his disciples. The goodbye is tinged with sadness because all his exciting and fruitful relationships would soon come to an end. The highly personal relationships that Jesus had with his disciples were over and would never be repeated. As much Jesus' followers hated it, the in-person part of their relationship was over. Never again would they sit around a fire on the beach cooking fish or would they sail across Lake Galilee during the dark of night. Never again would the disciples listen to the voice of their leader as he read and explained the scriptures to them. Never again would the disciples walk down a dusty road with Jesus and engage him with intimate conversation. Never again.

For most of us, goodbye is not a comfortable word. Saying goodbye and farewell strikes most of us at a place very deep within our soul. Depending upon the depth of the human relationship, goodbye can be a heart rending experience. We happen to live in a community in which lots of goodbyes and farewells are said. On any given day you can go down to the piers at the naval station to see and feel those goodbyes being exchanged. When Sailors leave for long periods of time aboard large gray ships, you can count on it that there will be a lot of tearful goodbyes: fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, children, girlfriends and boyfriends. They are all SAYING goodbye BUT don't want to speak those words. For some the words are almost too powerful to utter.

On April 3, 1968 Martin Luther King delivered his final sermon in Memphis, Tennessee. The sermon was given the night before he intended to march with striking garbage workers who were asking for better wages and working conditions. You will likely remember his enduring words: "I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there

with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.” Using the example of Moses in the Old Testament, it was as if he actually knew that he would be assassinated the next day – and would leave his friends forever.

Today, the families, friends, neighbors and coworkers of twelve people are trying to say goodbye. First responders and news media people are trying to come to grips with the sights, sounds and smells of what happened Friday afternoon. The leaders of our local and state government, normally masters of the right word at the right time, are struggling to find the right words to say. In the language of the twenty-first century we call this the trauma of grief – and loss. The trauma of grief and loss is painful. There is no doubt about it. Today trauma, grief and loss is our reality.

Yet, that is a reality that is within the reach of God and the love given to us in and through God’s son our Lord Jesus.

In just a few minutes many of you will gather with me around the baptismal font to confirm the baptismal vows that were made for you. If you are one of the candidates who will publicly confirm and affirm your vows, I’d like for you to stand. The central part of what you will do is to take responsibility for your promises to God. Basically you are renewing promises that were known as the “shema,” to love your God with your of our heart, soul and mind, and then to love your neighbors as ourselves. In the New Testament Gospel of Matthew a lawyer asked Jesus a question, partially to trick him: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Jesus) said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’” This is the foundational story of Jesus’ love for us and his teaching about how we are to love one another.¹

Brothers and sisters, this is our story. We are the people of that story. By saying “yes” to the questions I will ask you, you are saying that with God’s help you are willing to be witnesses to the love that Jesus has for you, and to share it, at times indiscriminately and randomly, and always in a world which has at times turned more toward tearing one another down than to building Jesus’ kingdom. You are called to live into the blessing that God has for you.

Given our situation, I will end with the beautiful and appropriate words of the collect prayer in which I lead us earlier:

“O God, ...Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting.”

THEREFORE confirmands, may you be empowered to be God’s blessing upon the people of this world who await you!

¹ Matthew 22:36-40, NRSV.

AMEN.