



When I arrived at college, one of the places I initially checked out after the essential cafeteria, of course, was the university chapel, and one of the first things I noticed as I walked towards the altar was above the stone pillars to the left: there were these Scripture verses inscribed in the wall. And the one smack-dab in the middle, as if it was physically meant to be the central reality for all Biblical verses, not to mention the sacred centerpiece to hold any church building together for a worship or a Bible study or for music to burst

through organ pipes at all: “neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all Creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Even for those of us college students who did not exactly pay attention in worship, or participate in any Bible study, or have any care whatsoever about organ music, we knew about that verse. Enough people had told us it was their favorite, it had been brought up enough in family funerals; it was deeply etched into our memory. Who knows? It might have even reached the depths of our soul, but we just did not have to face the transformational power behind those words. I walked by that very inscription quite often in my four years there, but I didn’t have to really consider them all that much until April 16, 2007.

It was about a month before our college commencement, when around 500 of us were to graduate, figuring out what our lives would consist of that upcoming summer and beyond. It was just another normal day on a college campus. It was, also, just another day in Blacksburg, Virginia, for Virginia Tech (at least, it was supposed to be) until a most violent rampage ensued from another college senior on that very campus, starting in a dorm before moving onto the engineering science and mechanics building. Thirty-two students and faculty were dead before the shooter took his own life.

On April 16, 2007, Paul’s words were personally tested in a way they had never been before for most of us naive college students from Virginia Tech to Ohio and all over the country. “Neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all Creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nevertheless, it was as if those words felt exactly as far away as they were etched on that wall above the pillars on an elevated floor over the sanctuary ground level: far, far beyond any of our reach that most terrifying day.

To say the least, that chapel had a few more visitors than usual that Monday afternoon into evening. After all, sanctuaries have a way of being there for us just as much for those horrendously awful days as the days we consider to be the normal ones. That particular house of worship had only been standing there since the mid-1950s, and yet, even in a relatively short time span, it had seen its fair share of scared-out-their-absolute-minds students. Because, at one point in that university’s history, John F. Kennedy spoke on the campus, which made it all the more thoroughly heart-wrenching when he was brutally murdered for the whole world to see. Several years later, the despicable tragedy at Kent State felt a little too close to home. And, of course, not too long before Virginia Tech was 9/11.

All events on the earthly stage that would impact students who were meant to take time to learn about that very world and the humanity that enveloped it: to gain some sense of optimism and appreciation to go out into that very world and work not just for themselves, but for others, too. And yet, time and time again, they would end up wondering just how broken it all was, and whether or not the words inscribed on a wall were, in fact, true. Maybe they were at some point, but now they felt so hauntingly distant, as beyond our reach as any dream of a peace-filled world.

No, Virginia Tech did not happen on our campus, but it felt as if our collective dream was violated, our sense of safety and normalcy completely shattered. It wouldn’t be the same for us in a college dorm or an academic hall. And for those of us graduating, we knew all along we were not about to

walk out, after getting our diploma, into a perfect world, but it was a further reminder of what we were not fully prepared for: all the hate, all the lust for revenge, all the horror from our collective humanity. Paul's words were not just beyond reach. Instead, it felt as if we were undoubtedly separated from God's love by this most massive gulf of evil unleashed by us on each other.

However, what stands the largest in that particular chapel is the gargantuan monstrosity of a cross that soars over the chancel at the front of the sanctuary. There is nothing elaborate about it: no inscriptions, no artistic renderings on the surface. Just a cross, as if that is all that's needed to tell the whole story. As if, without that, Paul has no words to write at all. As if, without the cross, there is absolutely no reason to build a sanctuary to house the wonderers and the doubters and the word and dream-reachers from all various points of a faith journey.

In that sanctuary, that cross hangs high enough that it is most certainly beyond any spiritual seeker's physical reach, but the almost-intimidating size and height is not about the historical event of the brutal rampage that ensued on Jesus' own body. I like to think that it hangs beyond our reach so that we realize we do not have to desperately grab and hold onto it to feel Jesus Christ himself. Because, after all, he's no longer there anyway. He's not on that cross far beyond our reach, that we try so hard to mentally and spiritually grasp through any worship or Bible study or music meditation. No, our Risen Lord and the words he brought to life of no separation whatsoever between him and us, is not only on the same level, on our mortal ground floor. Those Gospel-clinching words that, our Lord, our Messiah, is even within imperfect us, as if he could not possibly get any closer to us.

So much so that not even a shooting rampage on a college campus could keep Him away, not at a safe heavenly distance from the most broken world scene. So much so that not even a global pandemic will keep him away from us. "Neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all Creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Evidently, we don't have to keep reaching for him. He made the decision to reach out to us from that very cross and reel us into a holy embrace that stubbornly refuses to ever let us go. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!