

## **Civil Rights Pilgrimage: Day 3 – Friday, June 2**

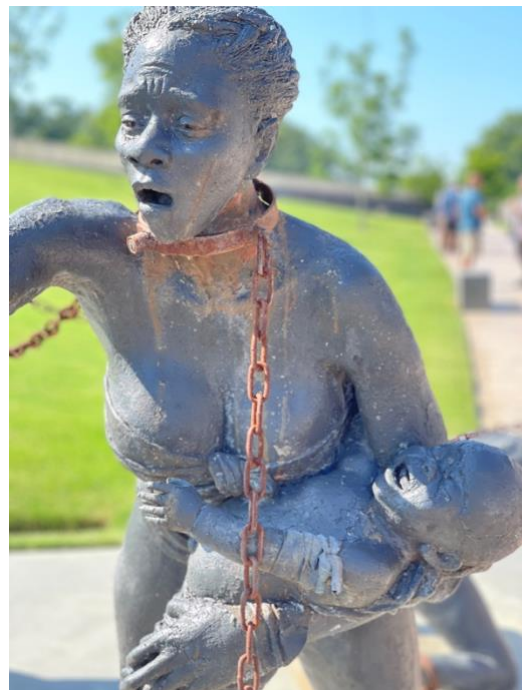
### **From the Rev. Mary Laymon**

I wore black today. Wrapped in a shawl of ginkgo leaves. As we were heading down to breakfast my beloved said, "You look like you're dressed for a funeral." I was. Today we would visit the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, also known as the "Lynching Museum", a sacred space dedicated to remembering those who had died during decades of domestic terrorism. I wore black to honor the dead. I wore ginkgo leaves to honor the resilience of a people who continue to rise from the terrifying darkness, daring the speak the truth, for the healing of us all.

Day 3 of our Civil Rights pilgrimage was a solemn day.

We began by gathering for breakfast, filling the tables of two after the young men and women from the Air Force, Westpoint and other armed services, in military dress, filed out to begin their day. I dubbed us the "Oatmeal Gang" as I noticed almost all of fortified ourselves for the day with a bowl of this hearty goodness.

It was a short half-mile trip from our hotel in downtown Montgomery to the Memorial. The walk into the Memorial takes us past a sculpture, reminding us that the Transatlantic Slave Trade kidnapped and enslaved more than 12 Million Africans. When we talk about the horror of Holocaust we acknowledge the staggering deaths of 6 Million Jews. When we talk about slavery we barely acknowledge that it impacted twice as many Africans.



The Memorial suspends eight hundred steel monuments, the size of coffins, to represent the counties in the United States where racial terror lynchings took place, each engraved with the names of its victims. I noticed a tension between taking in the large scale of the memorial, seeing all the monuments as a collective, as slowing down enough to see the details engraved on each monument, the names and dates for each lynching. Slowing down reveals a different horror, like the county in Mississippi where 24 human beings were lynched in one day. The Memorial lead us around a square, taking us from a space where we stood among the monuments, to where they hung above us. On the walls on either side brief descriptions enumerated the endless list of "infractions" that led to lynchings. The Memorial path led us to "Memorial Square", a green space surrounded on all sides by the hanging monuments, echoing the horrendous experiences that "hundreds of racial terror lynchings took place in front of thousands of onlookers in public squares and courthouse lawns. The Memorial Square Honors all

victims of racial terror lynchings; acknowledging the unconscionable horror of being tortured and killed while thousands watched."

I was grateful for the space in the Memorial to sit in sacred shadow, with only the sound of water falling along a wall for the unknown and unnamed but not forgotten. In this space I sat with Spirit, and spirits, story and prayer. A member of our group asked me later, "Could you feel the spirits all around us, could you sense their presence?" Yes, I felt them. I was grateful they felt them also.

I was grateful too for the Memorial Markers we passed as we left the Memorial, from counties around the country. Each marker acknowledging the lynchings that took place in their community, owning their part in America's story of racial terrorism. This is important, because it is not enough to tell this story here, in Montgomery. We have to tell the story in our hometowns, in all the places where racial terror lynchings have



taken place. As Dr. Meeks told us on our first day, "When we deal with stuff head-on we don't have to keep doing it. When we don't deal with it head-on, we have to keep dealing with it....How do you become one body? You sit in a room together, and tell each other the truth... Hear my story... hear my truth. Let you see me... let me see you. 'You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' It really will."

As we stepped away from the Memorial for Peace and Justice, the Alabama heat was rising around us. Over our lunch break I wondered out loud with my table mates about the incredible gift that this memorial exists. I remembered Dr. Meeks telling us how much resistance she faced just to place a small marker on her property listing the 900 names of men, women and children lynched in Georgia. And here we had just walked through a 6 acre site, dedicated to telling the story of lynching in America, in a southern town that served as an epicenter to the Domestic Slave Trade. In a country that does not want to reckon with this story, that is banning books, that is forbidding the teaching of this history, The Equal Justice Initiative found investors willing to fund this Memorial. My gratitude for them makes me weep.

And my gratitude for EJI, founded by the author of the book "Just Mercy", only deepened, when after lunch, we stepped into their "Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration", situated on a site in Montgomery where enslaved people were once warehoused. There was not enough time to take in all the history they told, beginning with the Transatlantic Slave Trade, to the Domestic Slave Trade, to the

Domestic Terrorism of Lynching to Mass Incarceration. The Museum's use of art and image, sculpture and voice, to create layers of storytelling made this one of the most immersive and stirring museum experiences I've ever encountered. In two-and-a-half hours I had only taken in half of the exhibits. My lament from yesterday that earlier museums failed to tell the story of mass incarceration was answered by EJI's commitment to connect our current reality to our history of slavery. My lament today is that I did not have time to take in this part of the museum. I am grateful I will be back in July when I return to Montgomery for the UBE Convention, where I can finish what I started.

After arriving back at our hotel, we gathered in one another's company, offering us a chance to reflect on our day together. I shared how much I appreciated the use of art to create layers of storytelling, and wept as I expressed my gratitude to those who made such an enormous financial investment to tell a story we have resisted talking about for centuries. Others shared their grief that they never learned this history, and our schools do not teach it, and their children and grandchildren have been denied access to it. We wondered together how we can bring what we are learning back with us, and what role we, the Church, can play, to be truth-tellers, when our civic institutions fail us. One person asked, "How can we incorporate what we are learning into Peace Camp, for example?". Good questions!! Others expressed gratitude to be on pilgrimage in a community of diverse races, that we are not all black, or all white. Eventually, we fell silent, circled up, and prayed.

We were on our own for dinner, offering each of us the freedom to process the day in a way that best served our spirit.

Today we visit the Civil Rights Memorial for Peace and Justice at the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Rosa Parks Library and Museum before we head to Selma.

So grateful to be on this journey, for the community I'm traveling with, for what Spirit is stirring in us.

Shalom,  
Pastor Mary