

Preacher, Dean Johnson

“neVer forgeT” “This Day”

April 24t, 2007

1863 - The Keyesville Massacre

April 15th

1865 - Abraham Lincoln dies after being shot the previous evening by John Wilkes Booth.

April 30th

1871 - Camp Grant Massacre takes place in Arizona Territory.

April 14th

1912 - The British ocean liner RMS Titanic strikes an iceberg at 11:40 pm and sinks completely two hours and forty minutes later in the early morning of the next day.

April 30th

1945 - Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun commit suicide after being married for one day.

April 4th

1968 - Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated at a motel in Memphis, Tennessee.

April 19th

1995 – The Oklahoma City bombing

April 22nd

1997 - Haouch Khemisti massacre in Algeria

April 20th

1999 – The Columbine High School massacre.

April 26th

2002 - 19-year-old Robert Steinhäuser shoots and kills 17 people at his school in Erfurt, Germany.

April 8th

2006 - The Shedden massacre in Ontario, Canada.

April 16th

2007 - Virginia Tech massacre, the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history, leaves 33 dead.

In the words of T.S. Eliot, "April is the cruelest month."

Massacre, assassination, suicide, killing, bombing, shooting, tragedy. Words that define moments that neither you nor I will ever forget. Flash-bulb memory as it's called in psychology: a memory that was laid down in great detail during a personally significant event, often a shocking event of national or international importance. These memories are perceived to have a "photographic" quality. When you are able to remember your specific whereabouts during a major event. Such is the case with those who are old enough to remember JFK's assassination, or September 11th for a modern example. Sadly, the memory is imprinted even deeper when you are only a few hundred yards away at the time of the incident.

Monday, April 16th, 2007. Midnight. A group of fellow initiates from my pledge class meet after the final vote for our co-ed honor fraternity. The only person of the group to not know if they were voted in was Erin Peterson. As the group left the dining center, Erin and I were the only two that walked east to get back to our dorms. The whole weekend had one of those eerie feelings that doesn't seem like everything is all right. I told her not to stress or be anxious about not knowing yet. She said she still wasn't sure because she hadn't heard from Andy, her big brother in the fraternity, and that worried her. I said, "I've got faith in you," smiled, and went on my way to my dorm. That was the last time I saw Erin Peterson alive.

I mentioned that April 15th was the final vote day for the fraternity. Weeks in advance I had jokingly dubbed that Sunday, "judgment day." They say only God can judge us. Regardless of your personal value and belief set, Erin found out about seven and a half hours before being killed that she had indeed passed "judgment day."

"I've got faith in you." It doesn't even seem like I could have planned my last words with someone any better. Faith: Confidence or trust in a person or thing. There was never a doubt in my mind that Erin would become a brother. There was never a doubt that she'd make me smile. There was never a doubt that I'd be able to make her laugh, have her to talk to, spend time with her, make her smile. That classic EP smile. I'm sure you noticed it in the pictures. It just made you smile when you saw her. Her rays of positive energy shined into each of us that were fortunate enough to get to know her. She was such a beautiful and brilliant sun that unfortunately set far too soon.

Monday, April 16th, 2007. 9:28 AM. My alarm goes off. Ironic that I chose an abnormal wake up time for what I did not know would be a day unlike any other I had experienced, and will hopefully never have to experience again. Normally I would have worn blue on this day, but for some reason decided to wear black. Right as I finished putting my shirt on, 8 cop cars went past my window with an ambulance in the front half of them. There had been two bomb threats in the prior two weeks, so I thought it was another bomb threat. I grabbed everything I needed for my Monday routine, and began to walk out the door, when my roommate came in. He said he didn't know why there were cops flying down Kent Street either. Around 9:55 I left to go to Economics class in Robeson Hall, three buildings down from Norris Hall, the site of the second set of shootings. About 100 yards from my dorm a girl stops me to say that classes are cancelled and there was a gunman on the loose. I went back to my room, on the snowy morning in the middle of April and watched history unfold on a TV. Buildings I was watching on CNN, Fox, and other news channels were some of the same buildings I saw looking out of my dorm room window. The death count grew. Frantic emails and instant messages were being sent amongst my friends and I trying to figure who was safe and where they were. Phone calls not able to go out and only a few being able to come into my phone. Fortunately I was able to contact my father and grandmother to let them know I was safe. I told them to spread the word for I was not able to communicate with very many people, and did not know how long this would last.

Monday, April 16th, 2007. Approximately 10 pm. It seemed like days had passed, but it was only a matter of hours. I was sitting in the apartment of my friend, who was Erin's and my pledge mom, Megan Caligiuri, when reality started to sink in slowly. We had been to the local hospital after being told EP was there, and upon our arrival were told she had been moved to the Roanoke hospital. After traveling to Roanoke we found that that was misinformation, and Erin's whereabouts were still not known. As I sat on the stairs at the apartment I received a phone call that Reema Samaha had been identified as one of those killed. Reema lived next door to Erin in the dorms and they had been friends since the age of two. I knew they were in the same French class, and as hard as I was trying to think positively, reality took control. After sitting and thinking for a bit huddled next to Megan in the stairway, I got my computer and did two things that comfort me greatly: listened to music and wrote. I'll read the last few sentences of my entry that started on the night of the 16th and ended early during the morning of the 17th.

"It's now 1:38 am according to my computer, and I've caught up in the present time with the entry. The song playing on repeat in my headphones is "I'll be missing you" by Puff Daddy and Faith Evans. It was made after the death of rapper Notorious B.I.G. who was murdered on March 9th, 10 years ago. I listened to it over and over one month and 19 days after that when my grandfather died. It's hard to believe it's almost been ten years. Lots of history in this week and in this decade. Tragic history that is. A few bright spots amidst the darkness, but not enough to shine through. Hopefully the future will hold better things. Erin's favorite rapper was 50 Cent. I'd joke with her about that, because I am not that big of a 50 Cent fan, but still listen to him from time to time. Erin said she was going to have kids with 50 at one of the get-togethers earlier this semester before a party. Her friend that she invited and I just laughed. Her friend asked, 'Erin, do you realize what color your kids would be?' Erin had a dark complexion, and 50 Cent could go by the rap name "Midnight" if he wanted to. Erin's response was, 'GREEN! THEY'D BE MONEY GREEN!!!' Erin wasn't all about the money, but she did like to be funny. I'll miss her sense of humor, and even more I'll miss her smile. I'll find it in some

places, mainly in my heart. I'll miss her greatly. Erin Peterson, you are loved. Rest In Peace. I love you."

Tuesday, April 17th, 2007. 10:51 am. I was hurriedly walking to the parking lot to meet friends to attend the convocation at 2 pm. My phone rang. It was Mother Megan. Trying to hold back tears, she told me they identified Erin's body in her French classroom in Norris Hall. It wasn't but 9 hours earlier at the end of my writing when I had truly realized Erin was not alive anymore. My group of friends made our way to the coliseum to sit through a tough ceremony that brought in the likes of the University's President, Charles Steger, Virginia Governor, Tim Kaine, and the President of the United States, George Bush. However, the most inspirational and touching speech was delivered by Nikki Giovanni. She captivated the audience for a minute and a half before ending her poem with "We Will Prevail. We Will Prevail. We Will Prevail. We ARE, Virginia Tech!" The Hokie Nation erupted with applause that lasted longer than the speech itself, followed by our "Let's go Hokies" chant. In that one single point in time, as much as any other since the 16th, we were one. We mourned together, we cheered together, we cried together, we clapped together. Did everyone in that building and the thousands watching from Lane stadium feel a sense of unity in that moment of tragedy? Yes. We have strength in numbers.

Tuesday, April 17, 2007. 8 pm. Candlelight vigil on the drillfield. Yet another touching triumph in the time of tragedy. Thousands of students, faculty, alumni, locals, and family members of the victims gathered to once again, unite as one in remembrance of those lost dreadfully the day before. The colors were presented by the ROTC. The candles were provided. The moments of silence were honored. Taps was played. The time to reflect was taken. And in a powerful motion all of the candles were raised toward the sky. Standing as a sea of maroon and orange, the Hokie Nation showed its support to every member of our family. I then headed to the car and received a phone call from a long time soccer friend, Travis Cook. He asked me how I was holding up, and if I was staying or coming home. He then said that this whole thing had gotten him thinking. He told me that while he had the opportunity he wanted to let me know that ever since we were younger he had looked up to me as his role model. I was genuinely touched and thanked him. Then he let me go to be with my fellow Hokies. I then got a call from my parents and broke down for the first time since the shootings when talking with them. The harsh reality set in that I'd never see EP's smile in person again. The fact that there were 31 other innocent lives taken. The fact that one human being with a mental complex could cause so much damage physically, mentally, and emotionally. The fact that I was alive to talk to my parents and they were able to talk back. The fact that amidst the tragedy someone showed me they had taken something away from the situation that was far more valuable than most teenage ideals, regardless of the fact that the gesture was towards me. I hope there are more people who have done, can, and will do the same. I must also, because I know that I'll "neVer forgeT."

Sunday, May 6th, 2007. Approximately 2 pm. Squires Student Center. Walking through the memorials, posters, and banners from other schools with my parents and Jennifer Purves, I gained a tremendous amount of perspective in seeing how it hit the three of them. The reality set in for them as they stood and absorbed in sheer amazement the number of items sent and donated from schools across the country. Schools ranging from those close in proximity like James Madison University and Radford University to San Diego State University and the University of Texas. Flags and posters from our rivals UVA and Miami of Florida. Russell Denney of the

University of Miami said on the 16th, "Forget any and all college affiliations today. For today, we are all Hokies." Despite rivalries that fuel college athletics and spark debates, the college community in its entirety was behind the Hokie Nation in our time of tragedy. Their support was greatly appreciated for we will "neVer forgeT."

It's hard to think that it's been 62 days; two months and a day; almost 9 weeks since the tragedy. But we must learn from this as we should of all events in life. Learn that you can do nothing about yesterday and are not promised tomorrow. A quote that I have carried in my wallet for some time now is very fitting for this situation. I call it the "This Day" quote. It reads, "This is the beginning of a new day. I have been given this day to use as I will. I can waste it or I can use it for good. What I do today is important because I am exchanging a day of my life for it. When tomorrow comes this day will be gone forever, leaving in its place something that I have traded for it. I want it to be gain, not loss; good, not evil; success, not failure; in order that I shall never regret the price that I paid for this day." There's a carpe diem theme to it that gives you reason to live for this moment now. It's ideal to end every relationship, conversation, day, task, etc. on a positive note. When you do it feels exponentially better. I am comforted largely in losing EP by the fact that my last spoken words to her were, "I've got faith in you."

February of 2006 Erin lost her "Big Nanny," her great grandmother, with whom she was really close. She wrote an essay last November about a defining moment in her life. She titled it, "Losing a Loved One and Gaining a New Perspective." I'd like to share with you a short paragraph from the excerpt given at her funeral. It reads, "I chose this experience as my defining moment because not only did I become a mentally stronger person, but my faith in God became exponentially stronger as well. All my life, my family has told me to trust in God and believe that He had a plan for all of us but it was not until that day did I actually believe it. That day I had to let her go and believe that she was going to a place where she would not feel any pain. It is almost as if when she died she left some of her strength with me." The entire essay, when read to us at the funeral gave me chills, but the lines that resonated most throughout my body were those last two sentences that I read to you: "That day I had to let her go and believe that she was going to a place where she would not feel any pain. It is almost as if when she died she left some of her strength with me." Having some of that strength has made these trying times pass with less pain. I am truly blessed to have been able to know Erin Peterson, and even more fortunate to be able to call her my friend, and my brother.

I never got to know my father's parents. They both passed away before I was born. My mother's father passed away when I was in the 3rd grade. I was too young to realize how precious time was and how valuable it still is. I would still be mad days later over a fight we had for the remote control for the TV. The "clicker" as he used to call it. I never got to know either one of my grandfather's. One, a situation I couldn't prevent, and the other, one that I could have handled differently, and in a better way. It's tough to realize that and live with that each April 28th after 1997, the day that my maternal grandfather passed away. Each August 26th, the day that both of my grandfathers were born. Each and every Father's Day. There's nothing I can do about that now, except learn from it. I take every opportunity possible to spend quality time with my Mother, my Father, and my Grandmother because I know the days are limited. I make sure before I leave them to do anything, be it go to work, sleep, school, getting off the phone, that the last thing I say to them is "I love you." This is one of the situations, where at least I hope, that

the quantity does not outweigh the quality. I mean that sincerely each time I say it. I don't want to have any regrets in the future because it's much more rewarding and pleasant to have someone truly know how you feel before they leave you forever, or before you leave them forever.

I am honored today, to share a pulpit with Rev. Dr. Chris Ayers, who delivered his most impressionable sermon, at least in my opinion, 53 weeks ago. It was one year and one week ago that he preached principally to Chris, Leslie, and I, his "Just the Other Day" sermon for our graduation ceremony. This, coming the day after finding out his mother had passed away and approximately one month after losing his father. He ended the sermon tearfully with, "Just the other day...my mother was alive." Yesterday morning I told my parents before I left for work that two months ago at that exact time my life changed forever. I thought about the 16th, tragedy, and life and death in general on my way to work. At work, I had a premonition that my Aunt Jan had passed away. My Dad called about twenty minutes later and told me she had died early that morning. I was fortunate that my aunt, who was terminally ill with brain cancer, held out long enough for our visit to Louisville last weekend to be a successful one in which we saw her and were able to say our final goodbyes. The last words I said to my aunt eight days ago were, "I love you," as I walked out of her hospice unit. Just "this day," one week ago, my aunt was alive.

With that said, think introspectively. Do you hold grudges? Do you go to sleep at night angry at someone or some situation? Where do you stand with your friends? With your co-workers? Where do you stand with your father on this Father's Day? With the rest of your family? Where do you stand with your God? Is this a place that you are comfortable knowing could be the last living image you have of that person? Taking anything for granted in life is undesirable, but especially a relationship with another human being. Tell loved ones what you ought to tell them, but don't often take the time to. Pablo Picasso said it best, "Only put off until tomorrow what you are willing to die having left undone." Wake up each day and do what you need to do. Procrastinating is one of the worst things to do, be it on a school paper, housework, or telling someone how much they mean to you. Getting caught up in petty tasks and arguments only limits your focus and outlook. See the big picture, see what people have done for you over the years, and the many things they have taught you, not just the trivial disagreement you had the night before. At the same time challenge yourself to live for the moment and be better. James Chapter 1, verses 2-4 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." You don't have to sugar-coat things. Problems will happen. Fights and arguments will happen. They're inevitable. But it is important to recognize when and how to reconcile. You never know when something unexpected or tragic is going to happen to you or a loved one. It isn't something that you need to fret over and let bother you, but rather something of which to be cognizant and act upon.

What would you do in a situation where you lost one of your closer friends? If they were taken from you on one of the least likely days at one of the least likely places? You can't bring them back, so would you carry on their legacy and better yourself? Or would you fold up and use it as an excuse? I hope that none of you have to answer any of these questions, but regrettably some of you will or have had to at some point in your lives. Most of the answers you can give now in your head would be completely different if the circumstance ever reared its head. In times like

this it is important to remember that you don't have to do it alone. At some point you have to depend on one another and use the help available. I could not have gone through the times at VT, while keeping a somewhat composed state of mind, without the people there to support me and the people back home, which largely consists of the people in this congregation. For that, I want to take this time to say thank you to each and every one of you. All of the emails, cards, and phone calls I received were a bed of support for me to fall back on when times became too hard to handle on my own. There are people with you in your community to help you through your harsh times. People at your job; People here in your faith community; People in your Hokie Nation. There's a quote framed downstairs that says, "We weren't promised an easy life, we were promised help living it." Know that we too here at Wedgewood can help in any given time of need and respond as us Hokies have. I could not be any prouder of my school and my peers and my community in Blacksburg, Virginia. It is truly a way of life up there to act like this. We have a quote that says, "We are who we are because we have so much Hokie Pride. Outsiders don't understand it, and if you're inside you can't explain it." This same quote can be applied to Wedgewood Baptist Church. We're a faith community that is understood by few outside of us, but loved by all that are within. Actions speak louder than words ever could, especially in moments like these, and people have been able to see what the Hokie Nation is truly all about. We will prevail because "We Are Virginia Tech."

I asked originally to speak to all of you after a service telling you thank you for all the kind acts of love, and to give you all an outlook that wasn't provided by the media, but from my own words, which are developed from what I saw. When asked if I wanted to do the entire service, I thought about it for a short period, and gladly accepted. This day in history has struck me in a direct way, and it is far too important to me than to be dismissed by outsiders as one of those things that was, "Oh, that's too bad that happened." Knowing how much EP meant to me, and the simple fact that she meant a lot more to a lot of other people, and there were 31 other people who were just as magnificent, just as loved, and who meant just as much to other people. That's why I will go out in a rage before this day is ever forgotten and before Erin Peterson's legacy ever fades. She meant and means that much to me, and April 16th, 2007 has forever made an impression on me. Please remember all of those that were directly affected by this tragedy, as well as Columbine, the Oklahoma City bombing, and numerous other events I did or didn't name. In your bulletin you'll find a small card that says, "neVer forgeT" "This Day." I wish that you all will take away something deep and meaningful from my words today, but if not, I gave you something that you can literally take away.

I don't want this to come across as me taking the time to stand on my soap box and brag about the school that I go to. It is true that I love it and support it as much as I can, but we have been able to achieve more of an inner peace throughout this whole process because of the support amongst one another. This is capable of any group of human beings, but thankfully not everyone is put in these scenarios. You are never too old to learn, and never too young to teach. Through the actions and response of a bunch of college kids, alumni, support groups, and the local community I hope that you have learned a thing or two about this thing known as life. Please know that long after this sermon, long after this service, long after tomorrow, this week, month, year, it is my hope that you "neVer forgeT" "This Day."