

“Commemorate and Mourn, Celebrate and Warn”
Remarks for Associate Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson on the
60th Anniversary of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing
September 15th, 2023 | 9:30 a.m.

I.

Let me start by saying good morning. I am truly humbled to be here on this beautiful morning in this holy sanctuary, where so much work has been done over the years to move our country forward.

I’d like to extend my thanks to Senator Jones for that kind introduction and for graciously agreeing to serve as my host on this visit. I would also like to give my sincerest thanks to Reverend Price for inviting me to speak at today’s service. It is a blessing to join you and Congresswoman Sewell, Assistant Attorney General Clarke, Mayor Woodfin, and all of the other participants and distinguished guests here today, as we honor the lasting impact of the Civil Rights Movement and pay tribute to those who lost their lives in the great and ongoing struggle toward equality, freedom, and justice.

Now I’d be remiss if I did not take a moment to acknowledge at the outset those present now who were also in this church 60 years ago today—at the scene of the tragic event that has brought us together. To the survivors and the victims: I cannot imagine the strength that it must take to keep coming back here after what you have endured. May we all learn from your commitment to this cause, and from the grace that you have repeatedly shown, even in your longstanding grief.

II.

I thought I would begin my remarks this morning by making a confession—and that is: I have never been to the state of Alabama before. Despite growing up in nearby Florida and having a mother, aunt, and uncle who are all proud graduates of Tuskegee University; despite having a godmother who lives in Birmingham and is here with me today, I have to admit this is my very first time visiting this great state.

Now, I don't want you to get the wrong impression: I am not unfamiliar with this community or what has happened here. I want to assure you that I actually do know a lot about Alabama, and in particular, about its critical connection to the Civil Rights struggles of African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. So, while I have not *been* to Alabama, I can quite confidently say that I *know* Alabama—and if you knew my parents, you would understand why.

A

You see, my parents are African Americans who grew up in South Florida at a time of racial segregation. They came of age during the Civil Rights Movement, and they chose to enter the field of education after graduating from Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the late 1960s. They were public school teachers when I was born.

Now these facts are important to know because my parents were *deeply* committed to my education, knowledge, and wellbeing when I was a child. And it is also quite clear that my parents viewed my entry into this world in September of 1970 as a genuine opportunity to nurture the long-denied American dream. So many African Americans of their era had been prevented from realizing their full potential. So many dreams had been deferred.

And so, when I was born—on the other side of high water mark of the Movement, a mere two years after Congress enacted not one but two Civil Rights Acts and the Voting Rights Act—my parents seized the day. They gave me an African name, and deliberately set out to ensure that I could do anything I wanted to do. They saw it as their responsibility to make sure that I was well equipped to take full advantage of the doors that had been opened, and they wanted most of all to *prepare* me for what they fervently believed would be a great and glorious future.

This preparation started basically when I was a toddler (and, bear with me, this is where Alabama comes in). As educators, my parents understood that if I was going to be successful, I needed to know the truth about a great many things, and one of those things was Black history—the race-based experiences of African Americans in this country through the ages. My parents knew Black history inside and out, and they intentionally set about teaching it to *me*, as a young child. And, of course, as you well know, Alabama is ground zero when it comes this kind of instruction.

So, although I've not been here before, I know Alabama.

I was probably no more than 4 or 5 when I started telling anyone who'd listen that on December 1, 1955, Ms. Rosa Parks said "no" when she was asked to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery. I knew that Dr. King had spent 8 lonely days in a jail right here in Birmingham, and I could spot young John Lewis from almost any angle in those grainy photographs of a crowded bridge in Selma taken on that Bloody Sunday.

I also knew that four little girls, not much older than myself, had been murdered at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church when a bomb ripped through the basement, awakening the Nation and the world to the horrors of race-based violence and oppression. I knew those girls were killed simply because they were Black, and because, at that time, Black people were rising up to demand equal rights. Tough stuff for a child. But my parents never lied to me. And they sincerely believed that I needed to know the truth about what had happened in Alabama and elsewhere if I was going to be prepared for life in America.

B

So why I am telling you this? Well, one reason is to emphasize how much it means to me to finally have the opportunity to come and immerse myself in a historical and cultural experience that I have known about for my entire life. But I do know that my long absence also begs at least two questions. The first is "what took you so long?"—and I am sure at least a few of you are thinking that right now, and that is a good question.

But if you will indulge me, what I want to address this morning is the second question—which is “why *now*?” Why, with all that’s going on at the Court and in the world right now, would you choose *this* moment as your first visit to this great state?

I have been thinking about that question a lot, quite a bit, my motivation for accepting Reverend Price’s kind invitation when there are so many others that I have had to politely decline. And I guess the honest answer is: I felt in my spirit that I *had* to come.

You see, I’ve been through something over the past year and a half, and it’s been quite humbling and exhausting and eye-opening as an experience. My journey has been high profile by nature, and wonderfully supportive people from all over the country have reached out to tell me how much my appointment as the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States has meant to them. Some have even said that they never thought they would see this happen in their lifetimes.

And what has happened, I think, is that all of the attention to my race and my gender and the historical nature of my appointment has caused me to develop an intense yearning to better understand *why*. *Why* have our nation’s highest reaches been out of grasp for so many? *Why* has the opportunity to participate fully in the promise of America been kept from African Americans for so long? *Why* has it taken 232 years and 115 prior appointments for a Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court?

So, I have come to Alabama to wrestle with these questions in a community that knows firsthand how difficult the journey has been. A place where people remember what it cost to make it this far. I come with the understanding that I did not reach these professional heights on my own—that people of all races and faiths, people of courage and conviction cleared the path for me in the wake of the horrible tragedy that snuffed out the too-brief lives of those four little girls inside this sacred space.

I have come to Alabama with a heart filled with gratitude, for unlike those four little girls, I have *lived* and have been entrusted with the solemn responsibility of serving our great Nation—a service that I hope will inspire people, and especially young people, to think about what is possible, to understand the law, and to re-commit themselves to the Constitution and its core values: the rule of law, democracy, freedom, justice, and equality.

I have also come to Alabama to bring a message about what it's going to take to ensure that those core constitutional values withstand these challenging times.

In a nutshell, I have come to Alabama to commemorate and mourn, celebrate, and warn.

III

A

According to Webster's New World Dictionary, to "commemorate" means "to call to mind," "to keep alive the memory of," "to remind." And there is no better place than Birmingham to remind us of our country's great struggle toward equality.

News reports from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s establish that there were dozens of race-related bombings in places that African Americans frequented during that time. As a result, instead of being able to live in peace and security, the Black community was terrorized and constantly on high alert. Churches in particular had become, and continue to be, targets of hate because of what they represent. Because they are promoters of love and faith -- that most precious of materials, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

And yet, the tragedy that occurred here, on September 15, 1963, was singular.

We all know the story, but it bears repeating that sixty years ago today, a bundle of dynamite ripped through this church on a Sunday morning. Survivor Sarah Collins Rudolph, who is with us here today, remembers a "deafening sound, almost like a freight train." The blast had been ear-splitting, but she could still hear a voice crying out that the church had been bombed.

Sarah was loaded into an ambulance for African Americans and taken to University Hospital, whose entrances and wards were still racially segregated. There were over 20 pieces of glass in her face, including her eyes. The explosion killed Sarah's sister, Addie Mae Collins, and three other young girls, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Morris Wesley, all of whom had been in this church basement that morning.

As a mother of two young women who will always be my little girls, I can imagine no greater horror than to lose a child this way. And even now, six decades later, the magnitude of that tragic loss weighs heavily on all of us. Because those girls were just getting started. They could have broken barriers. They could have shattered ceilings. They could have grown up to be doctors or lawyers or judges, appointed to serve on the highest Court in our land. They could have been any one of us, and we could have been any one of them. As First Corinthians 15:10 reminds us: "I am what I am but by the grace of God."

So, today, we remember the toll that was paid to secure the blessings of liberty for African Americans. And we grieve those four children who were senselessly taken from this Earth and their families, and robbed of their potential.

B

The theft of those souls and spirits shook and bent our own, but we did not break.

Indeed, it was from the rubble of the bombing of this church that our Nation renewed its commitment to justice and equality. The Civil Rights Movement gathered new momentum, resulting in Congress's passage and President Johnson's signing of the most significant civil rights bills since Reconstruction. American citizens from all over the country stared down state violence and joined together to peacefully march, pray, and make themselves heard. And, importantly for present purposes, open defiance of the rule of law—which had been marked by cries of “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever”—was finally overcome, such that by the time I arrived in the fall of 1970, it was a new day in America. Public schools had been integrated. The doors to the workplace were open to all. And the right to vote – the key to all other rights in our great democracy – had been meaningfully secured.

One additional, personally significant development occurred just three years after the tragedy that we are commemorating today: President Johnson appointed Constance Baker Motley—a civil rights icon, my personal heroine and birthday twin—to be the first Black woman to serve as a judge on the federal courts. That happened 57 years ago, in 1966. And, my, how far we've come since then—according to the latest available figures from the American Bar Association, there are 59 Black women serving as federal judges today.

All of those appointments—including mine—are a bold marker of our Nation’s collective progress. They give new meaning to the four words etched above the Supreme Court’s front entrance—EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW—because they demonstrate plainly that anyone and everyone now has the opportunity to thrive. They are a tangible reminder that we as a Nation have successfully moved out from our gloomy past, and that *all* of us deserve to be protected by our laws; *all* of us can exercise the rights guaranteed by our Constitution; and we *all* share in the promise of our democracy.

So, while our hearts are heavy with remembrance today, we do have something to celebrate. We are blessed to have made significant strides forward as a country since those four little girls entered this building for the last time 60 years ago.

C

Now, that is not to say our work is done. Academics, journalists, researchers, and our own eyes tell us daily that there is more to do in the quest for equality. And that brings me to the “warning” part of my message—the part where I urge us all to reject complacency and ignorance, and work to shore up democratic values and the rule of law.

As a first order of business, what is needed is for all of us to pay careful attention to what we *know*. Oppressors of every stripe, from the slave master to the dictator, have recognized for centuries that knowledge is a powerful tool. They have seen that once acquired, it can be wielded, and once wielded, it is transformative. Knowledge emboldens people. And it frees them.

The work of *our* time is maintaining that hard-won freedom. And to do that, we are going to need the truth – the whole truth – about our past. We must teach it to *our* children, and preserve it for theirs. In other words: my parents were right all along.

As I explained at the outset, during my time as a youngster, my parents taught me lots of uplifting things about places like Birmingham, and Montgomery, and Selma. The marches and the meetings. The sense of empowerment from belonging to a community in action. Like many of you, I cut my teeth on Movement songs: “Lift Every Voice and Sing” “Ain’t Gon’ Let Nobody Turn Me Around”; “Keep your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On.”

But my parents also taught me about the darker moments of the time: the dogs, the firehoses, the bombs. There was a *reason* my parents felt it was important to introduce me to those uncomfortable topics, and it was not to make me feel like a victim or crush my spirits. To the contrary, my parents understood that I had to know those hard truths in order to expand my horizons. They understood that we can only know where we are and where we’re going, if we realize where we’ve been. Knowledge of the past is what enables us to mark our forward progress.

If we are going to continue to move forward as a Nation, we cannot allow concerns about discomfort to displace knowledge, truth, or history. It is certainly the case that parts of this country's story can be hard to think about. I know that atrocities like the one we are memorializing today are difficult to remember and relive. But I also know that it is dangerous to forget them. We cannot forget because the uncomfortable lessons are often the ones that teach us the most about ourselves. We cannot forget because we cannot learn from past mistakes we do not know exist.

One hundred and 20 years ago, writing in favor of education for Black Americans, W. E. B. Du Bois mused that the “problems of social advance must inevitably come – problems of work and wages, of families and homes, of morals and the true valuing of the things [in] life.” But he also theorized about the response to those important quandaries, asking, “Can there be any possible solution other than by study and thought and an appeal to the rich experience of the past?”

His question – and his mission to root out ignorance in this country – has become no less urgent in this intervening century. So, yes, learning about our country's history can be painful. But history is also our best teacher. Yes, our past is filled with too much violence, too much hatred, too much prejudice. But can we really say that we are not confronting those same evils now?

We have to *own* even the darkest parts of our past, understand them, and vow never to repeat them. We must not shield our eyes. We must not shrink away – lest we lose it all.

The path we need to take—one of remembrance, knowledge, and understanding—is certainly not the easy road. But it is the only one that can guarantee our democracy’s ultimate survival. And I am confident that, just like generations of Americans before us, we are up to the challenge. Armed with our history, well prepared by our past, and secure in the knowledge of what we have been through and where we’re headed, we will triumph in the valiant struggle to promote constitutional values and obtain freedom and justice for all.

In the time that I’ve been here, I am so pleased to see that Birmingham is already doing much of this important work. The commemorative week of which today’s memorial service is a part not only preserves the history, it brings to life (for a new generation) the daily struggles and injustices of a not-so-distant past. Birmingham’s efforts are part of that long arc bending toward justice, and I hope they will be a model for similar efforts throughout the country.

IV.

I will close on that optimistic note, for if nothing else, I have faith in our great Nation.

The people of this country have seen challenging times before, and still, we rise. We will link arms and step forward together—past the hate and fear, beyond the darkness of division. Knowing what we’ve been through will only embolden us to lift ever higher the torch of freedom and fairness, justice and equality.

And, just as we always have, we will honor those four little girls and all of the historical figures who have paid the ultimate price for our freedom, by vigorously upholding the Constitution of the United States and the fundamental principles of our Union. We will embrace them, we will promote them, and we will protect them – even when it is difficult to do so – *especially* when it is difficult to do so. And through our efforts, with God’s grace, we will continue to push humanity toward the light.

God bless you and your families, and thank you for the honor of being here today.