

Living as Easter People: Called to Get Up

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

Sunday, April 8

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

On Wednesday of this past week, the nation remembered Maya Angelou, who would have celebrated her 90th birthday on April 4.

Angelou was born in 1928. She was sexually assaulted at the age of 7, and stopped talking to anyone for the next five years. But she didn't stay quiet much longer. During that time, she discovered a love of books and poetry and the written word – all of which ultimately helped her to rediscover her voice.

In her early years, she became a mother, San Francisco's first African American female streetcar conductor, and a performer who toured Europe. She would go on to become a journalist, a writer, and a director.

In an interview just a few years ago, Maya spoke in detail about her 40th birthday on April 4, 1968. She spent the day in her New York City apartment, making all of her favorite dishes: Texas chili with no beans, baked ham, candied yams and pineapple upside-down cake — all in preparation for a big party she was having that night. Later that day, her friend Dolly arrived looking absolutely grief-stricken. She shared the news that their friend, Martin Luther King Jr., had been shot in Memphis. He was dead.

"Life stopped for me for a few days when Martin died," Angelou said. "It was just terrible. I could not believe that this great...dreamer, this person who dared to love everybody — could be killed before he could realize his dream."¹

For years, Angelou did not celebrate her own birthday anymore, because it was such a painful reminder of King's death. In fact, she and King's widow, Coretta Scott King, would meet, call, or send each other flowers every April 4 for the next thirty years.

But again, she didn't stay down long. Angelou went on to publish her first memoir, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," the year after King's death, making history as the first nonfiction best-seller by an African-American woman. She would go on to write 36 books in her lifetime, and she became one of the most prominent civil rights activists of her generation.

This week, on her birthday, and the 50th anniversary of King's death, Google featured a recording of Angelou's famous poem on its home page², entitled "Still I Rise."

"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise...

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-maya-angelou-martin-luther-king-jr-20180404-story.html>

² <https://www.google.com/doodles/dr-maya-angelous-90th-birthday>

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise...

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise."³

Like Maya Angelou, Easter people don't stay down for long. "We rise" as today's text reminds us.

You may be thinking that last week was Easter, and it's true that we are probably dressed a bit more casually than many of the dresses and suits and ties we saw last week. Some of the special instruments are gone, and the flowers on the cross have gone away, too. Strangely enough the temperature has also dropped about 30 degrees! But, the reality is that Easter is not over. Easter is not only a day, but it's actually a 50 day season in the church year celebrating the resurrection. And so, as my friend Griff Martin, pastor of First Baptist Austin, wrote this week [on Facebook], "if the Resurrection celebration feels over and your life seems to be the same as always, well you aren't doing Easter right then. [Because] Christ is still risen and this still changes everything."

Given that it's the second week of Easter, you may think it's strange that I'm not preaching on one of the traditional resurrection passages today, although we will get to some of those in the weeks to come. In fact, today's story about Peter rebuking Jesus is actually one we touched on during Lent. But I have a good reason for bringing it back today, don't worry.

When Jesus predicts his death in Matthew 16:21 at the beginning of today's passage, Peter takes him aside and begins to tell him that this is crazy - it can not and will not happen, according to Peter. It's one of those moments when Peter just has to insert himself into the situation because he thinks he knows it all, even though he really has no idea what he's talking about. And Jesus has some pretty serious words for Peter in this moment when he says to him, "Get behind me, Satan."

I don't know about you, but if Jesus had said these words to me, I would have wanted to climb in a hole and not come out again for awhile. Jesus calls his bluff - and it was probably humiliating and infuriating to Peter.

³ Full text available here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise>

At the beginning of Matthew 17, it's been six days since this incident happened, when Jesus tells Peter, James, and John that they're going on a trip up a mountain. I can't help but wonder what Peter must be feeling as they're making their way up the mountain. I wonder if he is replaying the scene over and over again in his brain, wishing he had said something different – or wishing he hadn't said anything at all - like the email we sent too quickly or the words we know we shouldn't have said the second they slipped out of our mouths. I wonder if he's nervous about what this trip means - why did Jesus pick him to go up the mountain? What is he going to say or do to Peter?

But whatever it is that Peter is thinking, I'm pretty certain that he is not expecting what happens next. They get to the top of the mountain and Jesus changes, right before their eyes. Sunlight pours from Jesus' face, and his clothes are dazzling white. The Christian tradition has a name for this event – the transfiguration – as if giving it a name helps us to make sense of it. But just like last week, this is another story in Scripture that we can never fully comprehend. Jesus is sparkling and glowing on top of a mountain, and then the disciples look up and realize that he's talking to Moses and Elijah, who are there with him.

It is an incredible moment – even if we're still not quite sure what to do with it - and yet here for a second time, Peter bounces back into the scene like a know-it-all and says, “This is so great! It's so cool for you all to be here together. Maybe we should build shelters or memorials for you right here on this mountain – Jesus, yours could go right here, and one here for Moses, and one for....”

And mid-sentence, amidst Peter's elaborate plans, a giant cloud surrounds them, and a deep voice calls out – “this is my beloved Son - Listen to him!” It's as if the voice of God swoops down and interrupts Peter just to get him to be quiet for once and to pay attention.

When they hear this thundering voice, suddenly, Peter, James, and John are face down on the ground, all of them scared to death. But Jesus comes over to them – and this time he doesn't rebuke Peter. Instead, he touches them, and says these powerful words: “Get up and do not be afraid.”

His exact words are actually “Be raised” – which interestingly enough are the same words used later in Matthew's gospel when the angel describes what has happened at the scene of the empty tomb and says: “He is not here – he has been raised.” Because of that, some scholars have actually called today's text a “displaced resurrection story.” As Pastor Steve Pankey at Christ Episcopal Church, writes, “In the depth of his despair, after nearly a week of anxiety, stress, and dis-ease, there on that mountain top, Peter was still talking faster than he could think, but it was precisely in that moment that Jesus gave Peter his own moment of resurrection.”⁴

You see, last week was Jesus' resurrection story. This week is ours. And the question I'd like for us to ask ourselves today – and each week of this season – is, what does this text mean for us as Easter people? What insight does this story bring as we are seeking to live as Easter people?

Perhaps it reminds us that Jesus notices us when we're down. Jesus notices us when we're afraid - when the fear just seems debilitating. When we're humiliated over something that has just happened. Or when we're anxious about what's going to happen next. In the moments when we're blabbering like we think we know it all, even when we actually have no idea what we're talking about – in those moments, there's usually something going on beneath the surface, and Jesus notices us then, too.

⁴ <https://draughtingtheology.wordpress.com/2017/02/27/peters-resurrection-moment-a-sermon/>

Jesus notices us when we don't want to get out of bed in the morning. Or when we don't think we can. When we're afraid to apply for the new job. Or go to the new school. Afraid to put ourselves out there with someone. Afraid to show up in the world. Moments when we're right on the threshold but scared to walk in the door.

Jesus notices us in all of these moments. And yet he doesn't let us stay there for long. Because we follow a God who meets us in these spaces without judgment or shame but then says to us, "Get up, and don't be afraid."

Whenever we invite people to respond to the call to follow Jesus here in worship, there is an invitation to physically get up out of our seats. At Calvary we invite people to walk to the back of the sanctuary to give ourselves a bit more space and privacy, but at my church growing up, and I would imagine at many of yours, we had to walk to the very front of the sanctuary to meet with the pastor, with the whole church watching us.

I often tell people who are thinking about making this step in their faith journey just how terrified I was about this. The first week, I got up out of my seat, but then after a few moments I sat back down. The next week, I stood up and even took a step forward, but then I went back and decided that wasn't the week either. I'm pretty sure it took me three or four weeks to muster up the courage to get up and to go all the way to the front of the sanctuary.

But Jesus won't let us stay glued to our seats for long, because he says to us, "Get up, and do not be afraid." And I believe he gives us the courage and the stamina to get up, too.

On March 25, 1965, Martin Luther King delivered what was known as "one of his most electrifying speeches" in Montgomery, Alabama at the end of the march from Selma. The speech was "the culmination of one of the civil rights movement's most brutal but critical campaigns." Three civil rights activists were killed and other marchers were brutally beaten and met with tear gas at the Edmund Pettus Bridge that month. This march was actually their third attempt, and this time, they finally made it the 50 miles from Selma to Montgomery. And the success of this march led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act just months later.

In his speech, which actually took place on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol in Montgomery, a city known as the "Cradle of the Confederacy," King said the following words: "They told us we wouldn't get here. And there were those who said that we would get here only over their dead bodies, but all the world today knows that we are here and that we are standing before the forces of power in the state of Alabama saying, 'We ain't going to let nobody turn us around....[And so] I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again.'"⁵

That's the thing about Easter people. We will fall. We will be knocked down. It's a given. But as Brene Brown says in her book *Rising Strong*: "There is no greater threat to the critics and cynics and fearmongers than those of us who are willing to fall because we have learned how to rise."⁶

And if we want to be people who rise up in the ways that Jesus calls us – I think we have a lot to learn from Martin Luther King and Maya Angelou – and from anyone who keeps getting knocked down, over and over again, and yet embodies the words of Jesus saying, "Get up, and do not be afraid."

⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2014/01/19/us/king-speeches-never-heard/index.html>

⁶ From the Manifesto of the Brave and Brokenhearted: https://brenebrown.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/RS_Manifesto.b_8x10.pdf

So, what does it look like for us to embody these words?

Maybe getting up for you means showing up in this world in a way you never have before. Maybe it means following Christ in a way that makes you uncomfortable. Maybe it means getting out of bed early on Tuesday morning to give high-fives at West Ave. as students begin STAAR testing this week. Or joining us on our mission trip to South Texas this summer.

Maybe it means being brave enough to get out of a situation you know you shouldn't be in. Having the courage to ask for help. Maybe it means waking up to some of the things going on in our community and world – and asking God how you might make a difference. Maybe it means physically getting up out of your seat to tell someone today that you're ready to follow Jesus.

Only you can answer that question. But the call is there for you and for me and for any of us who are seeking to live as Easter people.

It's time to get up Calvary. Do not be afraid. "Do not abandon yourselves to despair. Because we are the Easter people, and Halleluiah is our song."⁷

⁷ Pope John Paul II