

“Still I Rise”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
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EASTER Sun.

Luke 24:1-12, *John 20:1-18*,

Luke 24:13-33^a, John 21:2-19,

Luke 24:33^b-53

Mary Mag'dalene went and said to the disciples,

“I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20:18

Let us pray... O God,

We thank you for those apostles who went forth to bring your Good News
of love, forgiveness, healing, and eternal life into the wider world.

We thank you for the role that women continue to have in sharing this Good News
for the liberation of all people and the transformation of the world.

Amen

Mary Magdalene was the first one to tell the Good News that
Christ had risen from the dead.

She was the first to be sent forth as an apostle –
which is literally what the word, ‘apostle’, means.

Mary Magdalene has been recognized as a saint
in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy,
yet the role of women historically in the Church
has been limited, even suppressed.

That includes American Protestant church history, as well,
though it is noteworthy that the UCC is the first denomination of the Church
to ordain women in modern times.

When I went to Lancaster Theological Seminary in the mid-1980s,
there were more women than men enrolled as students
following the call to ministry.

Feminist theology was in full bloom,
but it was still rare for ordained women ministers
to get *a call to a church* to be their pastor – even in the UCC.

There were women who made it, though, and some became potent voices
as theologians like Barbara Brown Zigmund and Phyllis Trible.

By the way, I will be meeting Dr. Trible this summer during
the road trip phase of my sabbatical.

Willard, p.2

In the summer of 1990 during the UCC Faith Works national event held at Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, I heard Maya Angelou speak.

Maya Angelou was a poet, civil rights activist, professor, author, actress, screenwriter, essayist, editor who came up in life the hard way as a cook in a hamburger joint, sex worker, nightclub dancer, and singer.

<http://mashable.com/2014/05/28/maya-angelou-jobs/#oV7ah.10M5q2>

She was also a survivor of sexual abuse by an uncle when she was a little girl.

When she told what had happened, the men in her family killed him.

Maya was mute for 5 years, because she thought her voice would kill people.

She eventually found her voice, and it proved powerful, but life-giving.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maya_Angelou

In the course of her life, Maya Angelou received 55 awards –

including the Pulitzer, the Tony, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom,

as well as 21 honorary degrees.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_honors_received_by_Maya_Angelou

What I remember most about her gracious message to us

was about how she was on tour, singing in the Middle East.

When asked for an encore, she sang a Gospel song that was received with reverence

by the Arabic-speaking, Muslim audience who knew no English,

but recognized the deep spiritual beauty of her song.

Maya Angelou died in 2014 at the age of 86, and her legacy lives on.

Here are some excerpts of her poems.

The first is the inspiration for my sermon title –

in keeping with the Easter message of Resurrection –

“Still I Rise”...

You may write me down in history With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may tread me in the very dirt But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you? Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns, With the certainty of tides,

Just like hopes springing high, Still 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.

[the poem ends with this...]

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.

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/still-i-rise/>

Willard, p.3

Maya Angelou's works speak specifically about the African-American struggle, but also the universal cry for freedom that speaks to us all.

Indeed it is the very thing Jesus came to answer through his life, death, and resurrection –

Jesus demonstrated the saving power of God by healing people from shame and disease and by casting out evil spirits,

which also symbolize the larger work for social transformation while living under the oppression of an empire.

Another poem by Maya Angelou "Caged Bird" – is at the heart of her autobiography, entitled, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings...

*The free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream
till the current ends and dips his wings in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.*

*But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage can seldom see through
his bars of rage his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.*

*The caged bird sings with fearful trill of the things unknown but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom...*

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings/>

Maya Angelou recited her poem, "On The Pulse of Morning", at President Clinton's inauguration in 1993, and said,

A Rock, A River, A Tree.

Hosts to species long since departed, Marked the mastodon.

The dinosaur, who left dry tokens Of their sojourn here On our planet floor,

Any broad alarm of their hastening doom

Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,

Come, you may stand upon my Back and face your distant destiny,

But seek no haven in my shadow. I will give you no more hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than The angels, have crouched too long in

The bruising darkness, Have lain too long Face down in ignorance.

*Your mouths spilling words Armed for slaughter. The Rock cries out today,
you may stand on me, But do not hide your face.*

Across the wall of the world, A River sings a beautiful song,

Come rest here by my side. Each of you a bordered country,

Delicate and strangely made proud, Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.

Your armed struggles for profit Have left collars of waste upon

My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.

Yet, today I call you to my riverside, If you will study war no more. Come,

Willard, p.4

Clad in peace and I will sing the songs The Creator gave to me when I and the Tree and the stone were one. Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your Brow and when you yet knew you still Knew nothing.

*The River sings and sings on. There is a true yearning to respond to
The singing River and the wise Rock.*

*So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew
The African and Native American, the Sioux,
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
The privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.
They hear. They all hear The speaking of the Tree...*

<http://poetry.eserver.org/angelou.html>

A year before she died in 2014, Maya Angelou recited a poem in honor of the 50th year of the founding of the United Nations, entitled, 'A Brave and Startling Truth'...

*We, this people, on a small and lonely planet Traveling through casual space
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
To a destination where all signs tell us
It is possible and imperative that we learn A brave and startling truth
And when we come to it To the day of peacemaking
When we release our fingers From fists of hostility
And allow the pure air to cool our palms*

[She goes on to say...]

*When we come to it We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety Without crippling fear
When we come to it We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when*

We come to it.

<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-brave-and-startling-truth/>

In the same year that Maya Angelou addressed the United Nations with her poem the UN also celebrated Malala Yousafzai Day on Malala's 16th birthday. Malala was an Afghan school girl who had been an outspoken advocate of girls' rights – especially for education, and was targeted by the Taliban. She was shot in the head and miraculously survived.

Willard, p.5

Malala also had the opportunity to address the UN –
in the dynamic spirit of Maya Angelou
who said ‘still I rise’ ‘on the pulse of morning’ daring to speak
‘a brave and startling truth’.

Malala Yousafzai said...

*"We realized the importance of pens and books when we saw the guns.
The extremists are afraid of books and pens...
They thought that the bullets would silence us, but they failed.
Out of the silence came thousands of voices.
The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambitions.
But nothing changed in my life except this:
Weakness, fear, and hopelessness died;
strength, fervor, and courage were born...
[and she said on behalf of "those without voice...]
One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world.
Education is the only solution. Education first."*

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept13/vol71/num01/Maya-and-Malala.aspx>

Think of the achievement of these women –

Maya Angelou who continues to inspire us through her words
and Malala Yousafzai who is just getting started.

They are the wise women of the ages and of the time yet to be
as such unfailing apostles of freedom that Jesus championed
in his life and upon his Resurrection from death
sending forth a woman as his first apostle.

Christ has risen indeed so that all of humankind can claim,

“Still I rise!”

Amen

Inspired by John 19:25-30

NOW STANDING BESIDE THE CROSS OF JESUS
WAS HIS MOTHER, HIS AUNT MARY THE WIFE OF CLEOPAS,
AND MARY MAGDALENE.

THEN, JESUS SAW
HIS MOTHER AND THE DISCIPLE WHO WAS HIS BELOVED FRIEND,
STANDING TOGETHER.

HE SAID TO HIS MOTHER,
“LOOK AFTER THIS ONE AS YOUR OWN CHILD.”
AND THEN SAID TO THE DISCIPLE,
“LOOK AFTER THIS ONE AS YOUR OWN MOTHER.”

SO FROM THEN ON,
SHE TREATED THAT DISCIPLE AS HER OWN CHILD.

WITH THAT, JESUS KNEW THAT ALL WAS ACCOMPLISHED;
IN ORDER TO FULFILL THE SCRIPTURES, HE SAID,
“I THIRST!”

THEY HAD A JUG FULL OF SOUR WINE THERE
WHICH THEY SOAKED INTO A SPONGE
AND TIED TO A JAVELIN.

THEY BROUGHT IT UP TO HIS MOUTH;
AND WHEN HE HAD TAKEN THE WINE, JESUS SAID,
“IT IS DONE!”

AND HE BOWED HIS HEAD
AS HE RELEASED HIS SPIRIT.

Inspired by John 20:1-2a. 11-18

NOW ON WHAT WOULD BECOME THE CHRISTIAN SABBATH DAY,
MARY MAGDALENE CAME TO THE TOMB,
EARLY IN THE MORNING WHILE IT WAS STILL IN GLOOM.

WHEN SHE SAW THAT THE ROCK
HAD BEEN ROLLED AWAY FROM THE TOMB, SHE RAN...

[Verses 2b-12 about the “beloved disciple” – traditionally believed to be John,
are omitted for poetic/prophetic license.]

LATER, MARY WAS STANDING OUTSIDE,
IN FRONT OF THE TOMB, CRYING,
STILL WEEPING, SHE KNELT DOWN BY THE GRAVESIDE...

AND SAW TWO ANGELIC BEINGS,
CLOAKED IN RADIANCE,
SEATED AT THE HEAD AND FOOT OF WHERE
JESUS’ BODY HAD BEEN!

AND THEY SAID TO HER,
“YOUNG WOMAN, YOUNG WOMAN,
WHY ARE YOU CRYING, WHY ARE YOU CRYING?”

SHE SAID TO THEM,
“BECAUSE MY LORD HAS BEEN TAKEN AWAY
AND I DO NOT KNOW WHERE HE HAS BEEN HIDDEN!”

SOMEONE WAS SPEAKING BEHIND HER;
SHE TURNED AND LOOKED.
IT WAS JESUS STANDING THERE,
BUT SHE DID NOT RECOGNIZE THAT IT WAS JESUS.
JESUS SAID TO HER,
“YOUNG WOMAN, WHY ARE YOU CRYING? WHOM DO YOU SEEK?”
SUPPOSING THAT HE WAS THE GROUNDSKEEPER,
SHE SAID TO HIM,
“SIR, IF YOU HAVE TAKEN HIM, TELL ME WHERE
YOU BURIED HIM AND I WILL CARE FOR HIM!”
HE SAID TO HER,
“OH, MARY!”
SHE WHIRLED AROUND AND SAID TO HIM,
“RABBOUNI!” – WHICH IN ARAMAIC MEANS,
“MY DEAR RABBI!”

JESUS SAID TO HER,
“OY! DON'T HOLD ME SO TIGHT!
I STILL MUST GO UP TO HEAVEN!
YOU HAD BETTER GO –
AND TELL MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS
THAT I AM GOING UP TO MY ABBA, MY FATHER,
MY HEAVENLY GUARDIAN AND YOUR HEAVENLY GUARDIAN,
TO MY GOD AND YOUR GOD!”

MARY MAGDALENE WENT FORTH FROM THERE
TO PROCLAIM THIS TO THE APOSTLES:
“I FOUND THE LORD AND HE SPOKE WITH ME!”

[AND GOD IS STILL SPEAKING]