

On the Rise

Text:
John 20:1-18

A sermon preached by
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Resurrection Sunday

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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried

him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.



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.
...
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.
...
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.

~ Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise* (excerpts)

Maya Angelou's poem reflects the strength she finds in her blackness, in her woman-ness, in her humanity and in the power she can harness with words. The legacy of slavery in her history – in the history of Americans of African descent, even the evil of that shameful legacy that is a part of a white cultural legacy as well – nothing will stop any of us from our need and our ability to rise.

Still I rise. Still you rise. Still we rise. Still Christ rises ... so that all might rise.

Maya Angelou might very well have been writing of the immensity of the Resurrection that draws us here this morning and every Sunday. History, which we know the conquerors write, would just as soon have written off Jesus "with bitter, twisted lies" had Rome lived on in dominance – yet history still tends to lean in favor of the powers in control and rarely toward those who are on the margins.

REVOLUTION

Yet that's what the Gospels try to do – what Jesus tried to do – what, perhaps, we have forgotten. The Gospels are not history – never meant to be history despite the arguments of some that they are eyewitness accounts. They are not history – they are meant to point toward the power of the One who will rise within us and among us so that the oppressed and marginalized of this world might rise as well.

It is a living revolution – not a finalized history – that we celebrate this day. A revolution favoring those whom history would rather forget.

Yet still we rise.



Brené Brown's newest book is *Rising Strong: The Physics of Vulnerability*. I haven't read it yet but I have heard a bit about it. (Those who have read it, forgive me if I've gotten it wrong – check back with me after I've had a chance to read!) But as I have heard, she reminds us that our fear of being vulnerable to each other has roots in our fear of falling and being unable to rise again. Not so much physically falling like those of you (not me!) who are getting older worry about but the physical falling that happens with age. IM referring here to the figurative falling that happens to each of us at some time our lives when we are willing to take a risk.

LUKE: Vader. Is the dark side stronger?

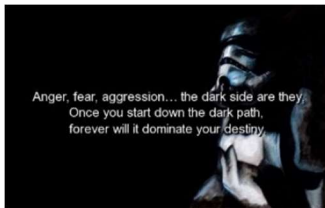
YODA: No... no... no. Quicker, easier, more seductive.

LUKE: But how am I to know the good side from the bad?

YODA: You will know. When you are calm, at peace. Passive. A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack.

LUKE: But tell me why I can't...

YODA: (interrupting) No, no, there is no why. Nothing more will I teach you today. Clear your mind of questions. Mmm. Mmmmmmmmm.



Anger. Fear. Aggression. Aren't they the very same emotions which drag down our personal stories as well? Anger, fear, aggression. And aren't they the very foundation that drives the Passion story we've been reading all week? The religious leaders, the Romans, the crowds that turned against him – they all feared what Jesus was offering them in his revolutionary preaching. Peace, love, compassion. The opposite message came from his mouth and it was seen as a threat to all that those in power held true.

Are those emotions stronger? Anger, fear, aggression. They are not stronger – but they are quicker, easier, more seductive, says Yoda.

One can move to anger so much faster than reaching for peace, its easier to be afraid than it is to find love in everyone, and aggression is seductive since it lets you grab power – false power, but still power.

It's the trial before Pilate and in front of Herod all over again. Anger seeped through their pores as Jesus stayed silent and the when he spoke he let their own words turn against them. Fear drove their attempts at scapegoating this prisoner – the Sanhedrin says let's take him to Pilate, Pilate says take him to Herod, Herod says take him back to Pilate, Pilate tells the Sanhedrin it's their problem, the Sanhedrin convinces Pilate that it's politically expedient to kill Jesus. And the biggest aggressive move of all that Rome had to offer – crucifixion – is the solution.

But how will I know the Jesus message from the world's message? How can I possibly know?



“You will know,” says Yoda to Skywalker. “You will know,” says Jesus to his followers. “You will know, the Gospels tell us even today. You will know what is of God and what is not. You will know. You know. You – we – know what is true and life-giving. It's not in the hate that spews from the mouths of those who grasp for power in our world – God is not in the angry and condemning voice of those who want power. And truth is not in the actions of those already in power in our world who chose bombs rather than bread, hate rather than love. Truth is only in the words of those who, like Jesus, stare into the abyss and remind the evil that truth is only from the one who sent him, the one who created us. “What

is truth?” demands Pilate – because he wants it for the power that he thinks it contains, a power that will hold others down.

Yet still we rise.

The Jedi-in-training, Luke Skywalker looks into the cave formed by the twisted trees that surround them.

LUKE: There's something not right here. I feel cold, death.

YODA: That place... is strong with the dark side of the Force. A domain of evil it is. In you must go.

LUKE: What's in there?

YODA: Only what you take with you. Your weapons... you will not need them.

Inside the total darkness of this wet and slimy cave, we see a lizard crawling up the wall and a snake wrapped around the branches of a tree. Luke draws a deep breath, pushes deeper in, and there he confronts the dark side in Darth Vader. A duel with crossed light sabers lead to Vader's head being removed. Yet when Luke looks at the helmet lying on the ground, he sees only his own face and a death stare looking back at him.

“What's in the darkness that threatens?”

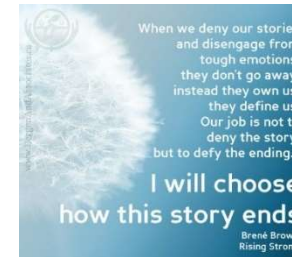
“Only what you take with you.”

“I'll take my weapons.”

“They will be of no use. Only you, yourself, can face the evil that is in your own story.”

Still in the end Luke – the Light – rises. The story is his to create and his to own and his to live.

So yet we rise.



What is your story? Do you own it? How does it end? Can you pull it back from the self-doubt and fear and doubt that wants to wrap around it like a snake wrapped around a tree? Can you create the story that you live so that it leads to the end that you choose?

“Life does not consist mainly, or even largely, of facts or happenings. It consists mainly of the storm of thoughts that is forever flowing through one's head,” said Mark Twain



The story that the disciples of Jesus crafted ended with their teacher dead and buried. The evil that they let into their story created an intolerable ending which brought them fear and anxiety and tears and denial and betrayal – the end that they had created caused them to run away and hide behind locked doors. Even when they got to the garden tomb which they expected to be sealed, they wanted to go with their ending – not the Jesus ending. Mary Magdalene is first – the tomb is open and empty – this isn't how

she pictured it! Peter and another disciple check it out as well – this isn't the ending they saw for their story.

“Run away, you must,” they heard in their heads, so that's what they did – “they went back to their homes.” Mary allowed herself to be open to a different ending, though. She was willing to let her preconceived story be changed by God's intervention, by letting a little bit of Light in, and by scrapping her ending in favor of a greater ending.

“In you must go,” is what her voice tells her. And in she went to discover a new ending to an old story. The finality of the death-ending can be overcome by a new-life-ending. “Mary,” the new ending calls out to her. “Rabbouni!” she concludes with an exclamation point.

“I have seen the Lord,” is the newly created ending to this story. Not, a stone-cold, dead-sealed tomb of death, but a Light-filled garden of openness and opportunity. The story is there for her to remake, and so she does. “I have seen the Lord.” No hiding behind closed doors, no fear or anger, no doubt or anxiety, no sting of death need ever be the ending of anyone's story anymore.



So we rise.

With Christ we rise.

Amen.