
Still I Rise: The Challenge and Promise of a Witness

**A sermon by the Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The Seventh Sunday after Easter – Year A**

Jesus told his disciples, “You will receive a power from the Holy Spirit coming upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” Then he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight.

One morning, Deborah arrived early to open the bookstore. She found a Hasidic Jew, dressed in the traditional way, standing at the door.

As she unlocked the door, he asked if he could come in. She opened the door and invited him in, thinking that he needed something right away. It was still an hour before the store was scheduled to open.

When she asked him if he needed any help, he said, “Yes, I want to know about Jesus.”

Deborah had heard this kind of question before and she knew just what to do. She led the man upstairs, to the section of the store with all of the books about Jesus. There, she showed him shelves filled with volumes detailing historical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, and theological understandings of Jesus and Christianity.

But, as she started to go back down the stairs, the man called her. “No,” he said. “I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. I don’t want to read about him in these books. I want to know what you believe.”

“My Episcopal soul shivered,” she said later.

She was being asked to do something she had almost never been asked to do before. She was being asked to put her faith into words. “I gulped and told him everything I could think of,” she said, “as much as I could sputter out in my confusion, in the dark.”

“Yes,” he said, “I want to know about Jesus.”

I suspect that most of our Episcopal souls would shiver too, if we had been asked this question. It’s hard to find the right words. It’s not that we’re ashamed of our faith, it’s just that, well ...

We don’t like to appear to be disrespectful. This man already had a faith tradition. We wouldn’t want to look like we were trying to save him or to convert him to Christianity.

We don’t like to be superficial. We wouldn’t want to say anything that sounded like it might have come from a politician, or a billboard, or a televangelist.

And, frankly, we don’t like to say anything that isn’t exactly right. Faith doctrines can be complicated. Most of us aren’t professional theologians, after all.

It's not hard in situations like these for us to believe that the Greek word for "witness" can also be translated "martyr!"

Yet, putting our faith into words is just what Jesus asked his disciples to do. That's what it means to be his witnesses.

On the one hand, it seems obvious that the disciples needed to be able to do this. It's hard to convince someone of something that you can't talk about.

But, on the other hand, there might be more to it than that.

Tom Long, in his book, *Testimony*, claims that we don't just say things that we already believe. We talk ourselves toward belief. We talk ourselves from uncertainty, through doubt, to conviction.

Putting our belief into words, he says, is one of the ways that we figure things out and commit ourselves to them.

It's a lot like talking about love.

When lovers say what they say to each other in the middle of the night, they are not just expressing their love. They are discovering it. They are creating it. They are giving it a future that it didn't have before.

"Yes," he said, "I want to know about Jesus."

How should we go about answering this question?

We have been warned that it will come.

"Always be ready," the writer of I Peter says, "to make your defense to anyone who demands the hope that is within you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

I think Jesus gave us a sense of how to do it in his last exchange with the disciples, as it is recorded in Acts.

It is what we might call speaking the truth in love. First, there is a challenge. Some truth-telling, if you will. And then, there is a promise, a sign of hope.

Listen again to the exchange.

The challenge: "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority."

And, the promise: "But you will receive a power from the Holy Spirit coming upon you. And you will be my witnesses"

From here, the disciples will begin their mission "in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."

Actually, you can see the same structure in the exchange that follows between the "two men in white clothing" (allusions, presumably, to Moses and Elijah) and the disciples.

The challenge: "Men of Galilee! Why do you stand looking into heaven?"

And, the promise: "This Jesus who was lifted up from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him going into heaven."

It's as if every witness is really rooted in a call story.

In some way, they all start with what Sister Helen Prejean said about her ministry to the death row prisoners at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola,

Energy comes to us because we get involved in something bigger than ourselves and our hearts have been moved by people's suffering, and we can't remain neutral. We say, "I don't know what I'm going to do, but I've got to do something. I've got to get involved in some way."

We lost a wonderful witness this week.

I turned on the radio as I was driving home and I heard her voice. They were replaying an old interview. I knew who it was before they ever said her name. I recognized her rich, bluesy voice and the regal pace at which she spoke. And, I knew that something had happened.

Maya Angelou, the poet, novelist and social rights activist, had died in her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She was 86.

Maya Angelou had done most of what there is to do as a writer. She had won Pulitzer prizes, Grammy awards, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She had even recited an original poem at a Presidential inauguration.

Her voice was so strong that I had forgotten that she had at one time chosen not to use it at all.

Maya Angelou suffered a childhood of suffering and abuse that actually drove her to stop speaking. When she realized the power of her words she held on to them out of fear.

It wasn't until a teacher started reading to her out loud that things changed.

Angelou said that used to carry a tablet around on which she wrote answers. One day, her teacher asked her, "Do you love poetry?" She wrote "yes" on the tablet.

It was a silly question. The teacher, of course, already knew the answer.

Then her teacher challenged her, "You do not love poetry. You will never love it until you speak it. Until it comes across your tongue, through your teeth, over your lips, you will never love poetry."

Angelou said that she ran out of the house, vowing never to return.

But, every time she saw her teacher, the teacher would challenge her again, "You do not love poetry, not until you speak it."

Angelou found her voice and with it the promise implied by her teacher.

Her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), became a best seller. It combined a Shakespearian formality with the wisdom and rhythms of the African-American women's oral tradition. And, it helped clear a path for black women's writing, and the success of writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, among many others.

Her work always carried the character of testimony. It always seemed as if she was talking about herself in a way that offered both a challenge and a promise to the rest of us.

You can feel the power of her witness, I think, in her reading of her poem, "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.

Does my sassiness upset you?

Why are you beset with gloom?
Just 'cause I walk as if I've got oil wells
pumping in my living room?

Just like suns and like moons,
with the certainty of tides,
just like hopes springing high,
still I'll rise.

It's all there.

The challenge: "You may write me down in history," she says, and "you may trod me in the very dirt."

And, the promise: "but still, like dust, I'll rise" and I'll walk as if I have "oil wells pumping in my living room."

You can hear it in her voice and you can see it on her face. She never shrinks from the challenge and she never forgets the promise. One never gets far away from the other. They travel together.

I know that most of our Episcopal souls would prefer to play the part of the silent witness, letting our actions speak louder than our words. But, you never know when an offer to help will be met by the question.

"Yes, I want to know about Jesus."

"Always be ready," the writer of I Peter says, "to make your defense to anyone who demands the hope that is within you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

So, what will we say, when asked, about the hope that is within us?

How will we talk about the challenge and the promise that we feel?

What words will we use to say, as Maya Angelou did,

Just like suns and like moons,
with the certainty of tides,
just like hopes springing high,
still I'll rise.

We have been called to be witnesses, to put our faith into words. We want to be able to answer the questions asked of us, of course. But, there's more to it than that. We may not really know what we believe until we find the words to talk about it, and say them.

Amen.

You might be interested to know –

The opening quotation is from Acts 1:8. The translation is by Luke Timothy Johnson. It appears on page 23 of his commentary on The Acts of the Apostles (1992), which is part of the Sacra Pagina series.

- Deborah's story appears in "Go Tallit on the Mountain," by Deborah Griffin Bly, *Books and Religion*, Spring 1992, on page 3. I saw it in Tom Long's book, *Testimony*, on page 21. The man who talked with Deborah eventually chose to be baptized and to become a Christian, by the way.

- The quotation from I Peter is I Peter 3:15.
- The quotation from Sister Helen Prejean appears in “With a Human Being Who’s About to Be Killed,” *Paperwork*, April 2000 on page 6. I saw it in Tom Long’s book, *Testimony*, on page 15.
- The radio interview had been conducted by Terry Gross in 1986. It was being rebroadcast on NPR on May 28, 2014. Here’s a [link](#) to it.

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