

STILL, WE RISE

A Sermon on Easter Sunday, April 1st, 2018

Readings: “Still, I Rise” by Maya Angelou; The Gospel of John, 20:1 – 18

How do we hear the story of Easter anew? It's a story that's captured the imagination of humanity and inspired tellings and re-tellings of what really happened, how it all went down, and what it all means for us as a human race. Rev. Tim Keller, who's famous for his intellectual slant on Biblical texts that's attracted sophisticated Manhattan urbanites to his megachurch, popularly preaches the Easter story as inherently rational – he's developed painstaking points in proof-texting the events of the day when Mary shows up at the tomb and Jesus' body is gone – only to reappear to her, in the flesh, risen against all odds. Pastor Rick Warren of the evangelical Saddleback Church in California sums up the entire good news of the gospel as Jesus resurrected from the dead, with the topper being that his bodily resurrection means we all are guaranteed an afterlife. If you're anything like me, left by these messages craving a way to connect to this story in a different way, then you're in good company. As we launch from Women's History Month into the birth of spring, the 'gay great happening illimitably earth,' as e.e. cummings says, we're offered a story in John's gospel that is, in its barest form, about a woman seeking God. Ironically, all four of the gospels we call canon, which are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, begin the story we know as Easter with women. In Luke, it's four women who come to anoint the body of Jesus after his death. In Mark, it's three women, in Matthew, it's two, and then here in John, Mary Magdalene is the sole witness. I describe this as ironic because as christianities (small c) became Christianity (capital C) as we know it, it gradually pushed out the voices and the leadership of the very women it owed its life to. If it weren't for these voices, there would have been no story to tell. The end of the story would have been an unlikely itinerant Jewish prophet rising up against the state only to be silenced by that state in a gruesome execution, a death meant to make an example out of anyone who would resist the power of Rome. The end of the story would have been his male disciples betraying him, grieving him, and fleeing for their lives.

But that *wasn't* the end of the story. In a blog known as “The Good Men Project: The Conversation No One Else is Having,” Derek Penwell makes a keen, if obvious, point about how little credit has been given to the women of Jesus' movement, beginning with what many Christians feel is the most crucial part, the Easter story. In his aptly-named article entitled, “How we treat Mary Magdalene is key to Understanding how we Treat Women: One Man's Post-Easter Awareness,” Penwell describes sitting in church one Easter and suddenly hearing the story for the first time, notably realizing that the gospel writers put women at the center of Christianity's most important narrative. More importantly, he points out, women are the first bearers of the good news of Easter, while the men are nowhere to be found.

But what's most powerful is not the fact that Penwell, a churchgoing Christian and cisgendered straight man, figured this out and called it out in a forum specifically geared toward other men, it's how he acknowledges who Mary Magdalene is in contrast to how Christianity has shaped her, and what that means for how we respond to women in general. The traditional narrative paints Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute, a symbol of female sexuality tamed and thus redeemed. But this was one man's interpretation, and that man was Pope Gregory the Great, and there's no evidence that this was the case. Even after the Catholic Church officially overruled this interpretation in 1969, it stuck, much like the reductive interpretation of Mary's ancestor Eve as the ultimate symbol for dangerous female sexuality. All the accounts in other gospels that didn't make it into canon, accounts that identify Mary as a prominent disciple in her own right, have, in keeping with this narrative, remained shunned as heresies. Penwell notes how this power dynamic reifies a patriarchal structure that defies the very radicality of Jesus' ministry. He writes: “Jesus' bona fides as a world-class forgiver are surely bolstered by his mercy toward a woman of the evening...the whole issue becomes more

sinister when we take into account the apparent need to sex up a central figure in the Gospel account – *just because of her gender*. Men in the traditional telling of Jesus’ story may be crooks and bastards, but they’re honest crooks and bastards – which is to say, they’re awful in non-sexual ways.” Penwell’s point is crucial – tradition has overtly steered us toward the hapless male disciples with the dubious denier Peter as the cornerstone of the church, while glossing over the 13 gospel accounts outside of the four we know that point to Mary Magdalene as the beloved disciple, clear in her mission and courageous in her leadership. The need to contrast the most prominent women surrounding Jesus – his mother Mary and his disciple Mary – as a non-sexual virgin and an over-sexualized repentant prostitute – erases the complexity of these figures, with their moral tenacity and embodied resistance at the cross and the tomb, instead replacing them with caricatured archetypes. The problem is, Penwell concludes, “the way we talk about women in the bible informs how we see women in our lives.” When we discount the identity and the role that Mary Magdalene and other women of the bible play in our most sacred stories, when women are reduced to literary devices used to foil the virtuosity of men, how can we help but at best ignore, and at worst exploit and abuse the women in our own societies who rise up to declare good news? So it is that I unapologetically repeat that this good news, this proclamation that life had conquered death, that love had conquered terror, that the rabbi Jeshua’s ministry would never be silenced, was declared by a woman, as John tells it, a woman alone, a woman grieving, and still, a woman who would not be moved.

It is prophetic that this Easter season, another woman has risen up with unusual courage in the face of powerful forces that desire to silence her. This young woman is Emma Gonzalez, an 18-year-old student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL. Stoneman Douglas, and Ms. Gonzalez, have almost overnight become household names when just six weeks ago they experienced an act of domestic terror in the form of yet another mass shooting, and miraculously mobilized the entire nation to pay a different kind of attention to their grief. Like the gospel story, I have found it impossible to turn away from the surge of new life that these students have infused into our nation, claiming transformation in a society that has grown calcified in its ability to respond to violence in any meaningful way; a society that, like the setting in which Easter sprung forth, had become so entrenched in unequal power structures that it was immobilized, trapped by generational trauma and a grief that could only feel powerless to create change. But Easter tells us that still, love rises. In this new movement, several students have begun to emerge as clear leaders, but Emma Gonzalez has been at the forefront, with a voice that has evoked controversy and inspiration. As a Cuban-American, queer young woman, she is unapologetic in her identity and crystal clear in her message. No wonder they’re going after her. Last Saturday, during a massive demonstration in DC that pulled in an unusually diverse crowd of people, Gonzalez spoke little but said much. Her speech, only about two minutes in length, went viral online as she stood onstage for 6 minutes and 20 seconds, the amount of time that it took for the lone gunman to kill 17 of her colleagues and injure dozens. At the end of the silence, she charged the crowd, “Fight for your lives, before it’s someone else’s job.” In her brief time as the emergent leader in this student-led movement, Gonzalez has written eloquent essays for TeenVogue and Harper’s Bazaar, and has been covered by every major news publication in the country. In the same amount of time, she has been vilified, slandered, and mocked for how she speaks truth to power and how she identifies. And yet, the face of the movement has become not the face of a clean-cut, JFK-type young man, which her courageous and admirable colleague David Hogg resembles, but a person who identifies with multiple groups on the margins. This voice on the margins is the voice that has given pause to the ones in power; this voice on the margins is the voice that declares the good news that life is more powerful than death, and that if we value life, then we had better show it. What a fortuitous time for a movement about fighting for our lives to emerge as we remember, as we celebrate, as we proclaim, with our faith and with our actions, the truth of resurrection. The truth that it does not matter what faith tradition you identify with, or how you interpret the events of Easter –

because Jesus still rose up. He rose up when Mary stayed after all others had left, to use her voice to proclaim that death was not the end of the story. He rose up when Paul committed his life to a ministry of radical equality. He rose up when rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, black and white sat down at the same tables and broke bread under an empire 2,000 years ago that told them that human beings are commodities, and an empire that commodifies human beings right now in 2018. / Beloved, he rises every time we say “never again” to immoral budgets that cut our children’s education and feed our military war machine; he rises every time we say “never again” to racial profiling that aims to disenfranchise and disempower God’s children of color, every time we say “never again” to the forcing of women to live out unwanted pregnancies while the infant and mother mortality rate for women of color in this land of plenty is higher than any other developed country; every time we say “never again” to human trafficking into our borders which disproportionately affects women and girls at a rate of 8 to 2. He still rises through the young female leadership of Emma Gonzalez, Naomi Wadler, Edna Chavez, Marisa Pyle, and more, *and* in the young male leadership of David Hogg, Cameron Kasky, Trevon Bosley, Alex Wind, and more – whose only concerns should be going to baseball practice, studying for finals and getting ready for prom, but who chose to stay, who were compelled to rise, when others had fled, to teach us what it is to fight for our lives by fighting for the lives of others.

To fight for our lives by fighting for the lives of others. *This* is Easter. *This* is how still, in spite of the darkness of ignorance, in spite of the reality of injustice, in spite of the threat of death, still, we rise. This is how, as Maya Angelou writes, but still, like dust, *I rise...*still, like dust, **we** rise.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

We rise

Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear

We rise

*Bringing the gifts that our ancestors gave,
We are the dream and the hope of the slave.*

We rise

We rise

We rise