

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Start with Courage”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**Ascension Sunday (Year A)
May 28, 2017
Ephesians 1:15-23; Acts 1:1-11; Luke 24:44-53**

Maya Angelou knows a lot about courage.

Maya Angelou, poet, dancer, author, teacher, and civil-rights activist, faced numerous physical, mental, and emotional challenges in her life – some which left her wracked with pain, many which required intense courage for her to face and move beyond.

She often attributed her courage to her mother, who encouraged her to develop courage and who showed her what courage looked like. Angelou believed that we aren’t born with courage, but that we develop it, in the same way we can eventually lift a 100-pound bag of rice by starting with a 5 pound bag, and then a ten pound one, and on up until we are strong enough to lift the 100 pound bag. We learn courage and practice it and develop it so that we can face whatever comes our way. In interviews and writing, Angelou often referred to courage as the greatest, of all the virtues.

I am convinced [she once said] that courage is the most important of all the virtues. Because without courage, you cannot practice any other virtue consistently. You can be kind for a while; you can be generous for a while; you can be just for a while, or merciful for a while, even loving for a while. But it is only with courage that you can be persistently and insistently kind and generous and fair.¹

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/on-leadership/wp/2014/05/28/maya-angelou-on-leadership-courage-and-the-creative-process/>

Courage is what allows us to face new challenges or transitions in life head on in spite of our fears. We need courage when we start a new job, start a new school, or start a new relationship. We need courage when we retire, or graduate, or leave an unhealthy relationship. We need courage when we are sick, or when we bury someone we have loved dearly. We need courage to face down an addiction, or to deal with the daily challenges of depression and mental illness. We need courage to deal with that which we cannot control. Sometimes we need courage to face our future. Sometimes we need courage to face our past.

There is not one among us who has not needed courage somewhere along the way, and often every day. Courage gets us through the day. Courage helps us face our fears. Courage calls us to change our lives. Courage, once developed, can call us to change the world.

In our passage for today, I think this is what the disciples are most in need of – courage.

On that very first Day of Ascension so many years ago, the disciples were faced with a transition that surprised and challenged and frightened them.

I can only imagine what they must have been feeling that day. Jesus, their master and friend, was suddenly lifted up into the sky and taken away by a cloud. Jesus, the one they had left everything to follow, went up into the air like a rocket and disappeared right before their very eyes. They stood there, the disciples (minus Judas, of course), staring up into the heavens, dumbfounded, not believing what they had just seen, wondering what in the world they were going to do now.

The disciples, you see, knew of their ministry and their life only in relationship to Jesus' ministry and Jesus' life. In Jesus, they had experienced the living Lord. They had walked with him and talked with him and broken bread with him. They had been transformed by his teaching and by his love. They had seen him heal the sick, preach to the masses, care for the poor and marginalized, and calm the seas. He had assured them they had nothing to be afraid of and he forgave them when they were still afraid. They knew he was the Messiah. How would they go on without him? What would they do? How would they live? What

did Jesus expect of them without his physical presence to guide them? Courage? Surely not.

Courage was not a new virtue for these men. They had been lifting 5, 10, and 20 pound bags for a long time now and had most certainly worked themselves up toward 100 – a well-developed courage. After all, they had the courage to leave their homes and families and follow this man Jesus. They had the courage to go with him to Jerusalem, even though he spoke of his own death. They had lost their courage, though, as he was taken to the cross; they allowed their fear to overtake them. They gathered after Jesus' death behind closed doors because they were so afraid that what had happened to him might happen to them. They were so afraid that their lives of following Jesus were over.

I am not sure how much of their courage they had regained after Jesus became known to them in the breaking of the bread in Emmaus and appeared to them as the resurrected Christ. Maybe they had started to reclaim that courage when Jesus disappeared into the heavens and left them on their own again.

These were the kinds of questions that were quite possibly bouncing around the disciples' heads as they stared blankly into the heavens that day. Eleven men in utter shock, too scared to take their eyes off the clouds, hoping maybe Jesus had just gone up for a quick pow-wow with God and would come right back, like Moses had gone up the mountain, but had come right back – well maybe not right back, but he had come back. But as they stared, the heavens stayed empty. They finally had to face the truth. Jesus had left them.

What courage would be required of them now?

The disciples were startled out of their stupor by the voices of two men in white robes – angels, of course – who said to them, “What are you doing, guys? Why are you staring at the sky?” “Jesus will be back. But not if you stand there staring all day.”

The disciples, perhaps, weren't quite ready to admit that the ascension had to happen. It had to happen in order for Jesus to take his proper place at the right hand of God, to complete his incarnation as the Son of God. It had to happen so that, in Jesus' physical absence, the Spirit might be poured out upon his followers

that they could continue the work Jesus had begun in them, so that they could reclaim their courage as followers of Christ.² As a physically present being, Jesus had been limited by time and space, only available to those he directly encountered. Through the power of the Spirit poured out in the days to come, Jesus would be present in ways that would transcend the physical, transforming the reality of life in the world everywhere by giving his disciples this new power for change, this new courage to lead God's people.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

No one standing around watching them that day could have guessed what an astonishing thing happened when they all stopped looking at the sky and started looking at each other instead. . . . But in the days and years to come it would become very apparent what had happened to them. With nothing but a promise and a prayer, those eleven disciples consented to become the church and nothing was ever the same again, beginning with them. The followers became leaders, the listeners became preachers, the converts became missionaries, the healed became healers. The disciples became apostles, witnesses of the risen Lord by the power of the Holy Spirit, and nothing was ever the same again. . . . They stopped looking up toward heaven, looked at each other instead, and got on with the business of being the church.³

So what does it mean to get on with the "business of being the church"? Well, Luke tells us that they started with prayer. They most certainly started with faith in Jesus and what God had called them to do in the world. And they started with courage, given to them by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I think this story has much to teach us about tearing our eyes away from the heavens in order to see and participate in what God is doing in our midst – and in order to bear to the world Christ's message of hope for the hopeless, food for the hungry, justice for the oppressed, a voice for the voiceless, and love for those who have been discarded by the world.

² From a paper by Stacy Rector, referencing Luke Timothy Johnson's *Sacra Pagina: Acts of the Apostles*, 30-31.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), 77.

It won't be easy. It will require a great deal of courage. Courage to work for peace, courage to speak and rail against injustices toward people of color, women, the imprisoned, those who have mental illnesses, those who have a disability, the poor, the sick, the oppressed, the victims, and the people long-silenced by the voices of power, money, and position. Being the church in the world means we can't just wish for peace and justice. They don't just, as William Sloan Coffin preached thirty years ago in New York City's Riverside Church, "come rolling in on the wheels of inevitability." "We have to will [peace], fight for it, suffer for it, and demand it from our governments as if peace were God's most cherished hope for humanity, as indeed it is."⁴ As the apostle Paul wrote the Colossians, "Let Christ's peace rule in your hearts; to this peace you were called" (Col 3:15). Being the church and working for peace and justice will take all the courage we've got.

It took courage for the three men in Portland, Oregon to stand up to stop a bully on a train and defend two women from anti-Muslim hate speech. It took courage for rescue workers to come into a Manchester concert after a bombing that killed twenty-two innocent people. It will take courage for Coptic Christians in Egypt to be active in their city again after twenty-nine people were killed in a bus attack by ISIS militants. It takes courage here in Durham to defend the rights of the forgotten prisoners, courage to stand for the protection of immigrants, courage to fight for SNAP food benefits for the poor and those who are food-insecure. It takes courage to fight against racism, anti-Semitism, and islamophobia.

It took courage for those disciples to tear their eyes from the sky and get on with the work of the church and it will take courage for us to tear our eyes away from the daily horrible news dispensed to us every day like crack to addicts. But courage is exactly what will allow us to take our eyes away so that we can begin with our minds, hearts, and bodies to live the gospel message of Jesus Christ, just as the disciples in the early church did, guided by the Holy Spirit and moved always along the path of love toward the peace that passes all understanding.

⁴ William Sloane Coffin, *The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin: The Riverside Years*, Vol 2. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 404.

Our courage reminds us of this:

Jesus has not left us alone. Jesus, who disappeared into the clouds that day is now present with us all – by the power of the Spirit - present and faithful and full of forgiveness and mercy, hope and love. Jesus, who knows life and death, betrayal and pain, and suffering and loss – this Jesus is with us to strengthen us and to give us courage to move forward in love for those around us – in love for the world. Courage that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the world might be changed to a place where justice, truth, peace and love are available to all God’s people.

And so, as people of faith, let us develop our courage together, so that we may have:

Courage to live.

Courage to die.

Courage to work for justice and peace.

Courage to change the world with love.

Why are you standing there looking at the heavens?

Have courage.

Follow Jesus.

Be the church.

Change the world.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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