

Nonviolence on the Move

A three-act play depicting scenes from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life

By [Frank Caropreso](#)

Characters (in order of appearance):

- Narrators 1-3
- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Reverend Ralph Abernathy: civil rights activist, one of King's best friends
- Rosa Parks: "mother of the civil rights movement"
- White Bus Driver
- White male passenger
- Coretta Scott King: Martin's wife
- Robert Kennedy: Attorney General of the U.S. and John's brother
- Guards 1-2
- A. Philip Randolph: labor leader and civil rights activist
- Crowd 1-5

Act 1

Scene 1: December 1956. Bus stop in Montgomery, Alabama

Narrator 1: In 1954, Martin Luther King, Jr., became the new pastor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He preached nonviolence as a way to change inequality. Dr. King urged his congregation to fight against segregation by joining the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and registering to vote. Then, on December 1, 1955, something happened that changed Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life — and American history.

Narrator 2: Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. The African-American community rallied behind her. A boycott was called against the bus company. A committee, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), was formed to lead the boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected as its president.

Narrator 3: Martin was arrested. It was against Alabama state law to take part in boycotts. He was found guilty and sentenced to pay \$500 or do 386 days of hard labor. Then came the news that the Supreme Court had declared that segregation on buses in Alabama was unconstitutional. African-Americans would no longer have to sit in the back of the bus or give up seats to anyone.

Dr. King: Here it comes.

Reverend Abernathy: Right on time, too. I never thought I'd look forward to taking a bus at six o'clock in the morning.

Rosa Parks: Over a year — it's hard to believe it's been that long since any of us has set foot on a Montgomery

city bus.

Dr. King: Mrs. Parks, by all rights, you should be the first one of us to board that bus. We're not looking for trouble.

Reverend Abernathy: But it might be looking for us.

Dr. King: I don't think there'll be any trouble. Too many eyes are turned on us today. But just in case, Mrs. Parks, it would be better if you stood between me and Reverend Abernathy as we board.

Rosa Parks: I don't care when I board, so long as I get a seat in the front.

Dr. King: I can promise you that, Mrs. Parks. (The bus stops. King, Parks, and Abernathy enter the bus.) Good morning, sir.

Driver: (nervously) I don't want any trouble. Sit anywhere, anywhere at all. 'Course you can't sit here. This is my seat. I've got to drive the bus, after all.

Dr. King: I would like the opportunity to drive the bus. I would like for any African-American man or woman to have the same opportunity as you do.

Driver: (mumbling) Great, now he wants to take away my job.

Dr. King: Not if you do your job well and treat your passengers with respect. Treating us fairly won't take anything away from you at all. (He turns to help Rosa Parks board the bus.) Mrs. Parks, where would you like to sit today?

Rosa Parks: I always like to sit up front by a window. (She sits two rows behind the driver.)

Reverend Abernathy: I always like to sit on the aisle myself. (He sits beside Rosa Parks.)

(King sits in front of Rosa Parks. A white male passenger boards the bus and looks around.)

White male passenger: Dr. King? Is this seat taken? I'd be very proud to sit next to you.

Act 2

Scene 1: April 11, 1963. In King's room at the Gaston Motel in Birmingham, Alabama

Narrator 1: Inspired by King's nonviolent message, college students began to stage sit-ins in the South. Lunch counters were still segregated. Black students sat at the whites-only counters and asked to be served. When they were ignored or refused service, the students opened their books and sat peacefully at the counters. They returned the next day, and the day after that. Each day more students joined them.

Narrator 2: The sit-ins began in 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, and spread throughout the South. Little by little, cities and towns began to integrate their lunch counters. In 1961, the Supreme Court declared that

segregation in railroad stations and bus terminals was against the law. Restrooms and water fountains for whites only were illegal. Separate sections on trains and buses were illegal, too. The South ignored the law.

Narrator 3: Busloads of protesters poured into the South to protest. Birmingham, Alabama, proved to be a hard city to integrate. On April 3, 1963, Dr. King wrote the "Birmingham Manifesto." Public places should be integrated, he said, and local merchants should hire black workers. In the first week of protests in Birmingham, over 300 African-Americans were put in jail.

Reverend Abernathy: We're out of bail money. We can't keep up the protests if everyone's in jail. We need to have money to bail our people out. We need you to go out and raise more money, Martin. Nobody else can reach the people like you can.

Dr. King: I don't feel I can leave Birmingham now. We still don't know what Bull Connor's going to do. He's head of the police, and there's not a man in the South who's got a worse reputation than he has. Now that the Alabama court's said that the protests here are illegal, he may think that he can do anything he wants to stop us.

Reverend Abernathy: What good can you do if you're in jail?

Dr. King: What if we don't continue to protest? What if we obey the state court? We'll lose too much. No, I've got to march. I've got so many people depending on me. I've got to march.

Scene 2: April 12, 1963. At the King home in Atlanta, Georgia, and the White House in Washington, D.C.

Narrator 1: King, Abernathy, and 50 protesters marched to the Birmingham City Hall the next day.

Narrator 2: Everyone was arrested.

Narrator 3: For a full day, nobody knew what had happened to Martin Luther King, Jr. He was being held in a cell by himself. No one was allowed to see him. The jailers refused to let him make any phone calls. Coretta Scott King took matters into her own hands.

Coretta: (speaking into the telephone) Yes, this is Coretta Scott King. I'd like to talk to President Kennedy. (pausing to listen) It's about my husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He's in jail in Birmingham. No one's seen him or spoken to him in over twenty-four hours. (pausing to listen) Yes, I'll hold on.

Robert Kennedy: Mrs. King? This is Bobby Kennedy. My brother's out of town right now. How can I help?

Coretta: Martin's been arrested in Birmingham. I've called the jail, but they won't let me talk to him. They won't tell me how he is. They've put him in solitary confinement. No one's been able to see him or talk to him.

Robert Kennedy: Bull Connor is a very hard man to deal with, Mrs. King. But I promise you that I'll look into the situation.

Coretta: You're the Attorney General of the United States, Mr. Kennedy. Surely, Mr. Connor must listen to you.

Robert Kennedy: He's ignored the Supreme Court. I imagine he'll take my call, but I can't say that he'll do what's right. I do know that President Kennedy is paying close attention to what's happening in Birmingham.

We'll make sure your husband's all right.

Scene 3: April 13, 1963. Inside the Birmingham jail and the King home in Atlanta, Georgia

Guard 1: (politely) Morning, Dr. King. How's everything today? We've got a little surprise for you.

Dr. King: (with suspicion) What's that?

Guard 2: You get to phone home.

Dr. King: You weren't so kind to me yesterday.

Guard 1: We were just having some fun. A little name calling never hurt anybody.

Guard 2: We never know what a prisoner might do. You've got to prove yourself to us. We aren't going to be buddy-buddy with a prisoner right off the bat.

Dr. King: May I have some privacy while I make my call?

Guard 1: Anything you want, Dr. King. Anything at all.

Guard 2: You be sure to tell them that at home, hear? Tell them how cooperative we've been down here in Birmingham.

(The guards leave the cell.)

Dr. King: (picking up phone and dialing) Coretta? It's Martin.

Coretta: Martin! Are you all right? I've been so worried!

Dr. King: I'm doing pretty well.

Coretta: President Kennedy called to tell me you were safe, but —

Dr. King: Who? Who called you?

Coretta: The president. He said he called Birmingham. He told me you would be calling in a few minutes.

Dr. King: He called you himself? Directly?

Coretta: Yes, and I spoke to Bobby Kennedy before that, too.

Dr. King: Get the word out, Coretta. Spread the word: the eyes of the world are on Birmingham!

Act 3

Scene 1: August 28, 1963. Washington, D.C., in the Mall between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial

Narrator 1: King remained in jail for eight days. During that time he wrote the "Birmingham Letter," which said that white Southerners were wrong for not obeying the Supreme Court. He also said that African-Americans were right to break segregation laws. Over one million copies of the letter were distributed. The protests continued in Birmingham. Children began to take part in the marches.

Narrator 2: Despite King's message of nonviolence, rocks and bottles were thrown at the police one day in May. The police ordered firefighters to turn their hoses on the children. Guard dogs were sent into the crowd. Because people saw pictures on television and in newspapers, the whole world was horrified. A month later, President Kennedy said he was introducing a civil rights bill to Congress that promised freedom for all.

Narrator 3: The time was right for a parade celebrating civil rights. It was one of the biggest peaceful gatherings in the history of the U.S. The leaders of the civil rights movement joined with labor leaders and clergy to lead thousands of concerned citizens in a march on Washington for "Jobs and Freedom."

Reverend Abernathy: What a turnout! This is truly inspiring!

Coretta: Martin's speaking next. I think it's one of his finest speeches.

Philip Randolph: And now, without further waiting, here is the moral leader of the nation: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!

(The crowd cheers and applauds. King waves.)

Dr. King: Five score years ago, a great American in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. But 100 years later, the Negro is still not free. I have a dream.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood . . . I have a dream that little children will one day live in a nation where they will be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. I have a dream...one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers . . . Let freedom ring!

Crowd: Let it ring! Let it ring!

Dr. King: And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, we're free at last . . . I have a dream . . . I have a dream.

