

It has been almost four years since George Zimmerman killed 17 year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida, a shooting that was first presented as an isolated incident, the act of an overzealous neighborhood watch member who saw someone out of place in his neighborhood. We all know now that George Zimmerman is a man who is prone to violence, who has been in jail several times; and we know that Trayvon Martin *did* belong in that neighborhood; he was visiting his father's fiancée. We know now that Zimmerman's attack on Martin was unprovoked. At the time, though, the killing barely made a ripple. Only after about six weeks, mostly thanks to a couple of journalists of color, did the shooting get national attention. And even then, the next month, when the magazine *Mother Jones* ran an article summarizing the case thus far, it's evident that we did not yet have a public understanding of the violence that men of color face every day. The article is in Q & A form, and one question is, "Has anything like this ever happened before?" and the answer is, "The case bears faint echoes of [the death of 14-year-old Martin Lee Anderson](#), whose case gripped Florida for nearly a year in 2006. Anderson, an African American who was attending a boot-camp-style detention center run by the Bay County Sheriff's Office, died during physical training that January." But that's it; *Mother Jones*, which is a left-leaning magazine, does not seem to know in 2012 that this is part of a pattern.

Then in 2014 there was Michael Brown in Ferguson. Then Eric Garner in New York, Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Walter Scott in North Charleston, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and many more—each one's name and story catching more attention as the American public began to wake up to the fact that our own police have been routinely abusing and killing people of color with impunity for years and years and

years. And then the Black Lives Matter movement began, and activists interrupted the speeches of presidential candidates who then had to show them some respect. Chicago's police chief has had to resign, and we are beginning to see signs that real changes in policing may occur. The battle is by no means over, but it has been widely recognized and widely joined.

The Black Lives Matter movement is one example of God's perseverance and the way in which disciples are called to join the commonwealth of God. Today's reading from Mark begins and ends with stories of people rejecting the good news, and in between is a model of Jesus equipping the disciples to bring it anyway. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus leaves Jairus' house and goes to his hometown, where people scoff to think that he could have the wisdom and power that are being ascribed to him. Mark says that he "could do no need of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them," which is no small thing, but the point is that his former neighbors could not believe that Jesus had anything to offer them. They rejected the good news he could have brought them.

Nevertheless, Jesus goes on traveling and preaching that the kingdom of God has come near, and sharing the kingdom with anybody who would receive him. He organizes the twelve apostles and sends them out to do the same, warning them that they'll sometimes be rejected but they should just keep going. Off they go, calling people to turn around, healing the sick and casting out demons.

Even King Herod hears about this, and suspects with a guilty conscience that it is a resurrected John the Baptist. Herod had respected/feared John—Mark says he liked to listen to him—but knew that his own political security could not co-exist

with John. For a time he protected John's life (paradoxically) by imprisoning him, but finally he was maneuvered into killing him rather than lose face with the political elites. It sounds to me like the conscience of a guilty man, interpreting this new Galilean rabbi as a revived John. Herod was a Jew, though not a very good one, and in first-century Jewish thought, resurrection was a sign of God correcting the wrongs of the world. Faced with a choice between God and privilege, Herod had chosen privilege . . . and now he saw that God would move along anyway.

But this is sort of the structure of the process of turning things around, isn't it? John the Baptist proclaimed that God was doing something new, and he got in trouble, and then Jesus broke onto the scene. Jesus, getting rejection and pushback along with some success, mobilizes twelve more people and disperses them around the country, while John is put down completely. God sets up this leapfrog pattern, in which for every step back there are two steps forward, for every prophet beheaded there is a pupil come of age, and twelve more besides. Herod acts to preserve the status quo, and God moves around him and keeps on upsetting the status quo.

I've mentioned the so-called Messianic Secret before, the idea that in Mark Jesus often tells people to keep quiet about the remarkable things he's just done. Well, maybe it's not so much a secret as a re-direction. Rather than focus on the messiah, that splendid hero who embodies the reign of God, we are supposed to *follow* him, join him in embodying the reign of God. Jesus doesn't want us sitting around admiring him; he wants us doing what he does. When the call to turn around is rejected and ignored, when the Good News is resisted, and when the prophet is beheaded or crucified, Jesus has taught our community to leapfrog over defeat.

Proclaiming and growing the Kingdom of God is a team sport. Everybody plays; nobody is on the bench just watching.

Resurrection is connected to hope, and hope is one of the most dangerous things that oppressed people can have. What Herod looked at with horror and guilt, ordinary people looked at with hope—the sign of God’s “Yes” after the world’s resounding “no.” And in between two stories of rejection and resistance, we have the story of Jesus carrying on and sending his community out. Rejection is a given. God continues nevertheless.

That’s why I see the Black Lives Matter movement as evidence of God’s perseverance. Four years ago most progressive white people were unaware of the prevalence of unpunished violence against people of color. It took a whole community of people—journalists, family members, neighbors—to pick up the story and tell their part, insist that these were not isolated instances, that each of these people was different from the others except for the color of their skin, insist that something wrong is going on and there needs to be repentance, a turning around from this deathly pattern. Michael Brown was an unsympathetic character and many people discounted his story, but then there was Eric Garner. Oh, but he was selling individual cigarettes; that’s against the law, and people dismissed his story. Tamir Rice—well, he shouldn’t have been waving that toy gun around, though I don’t know how a 12 year-old plays with a toy gun without waving it around. But every time, the rationale for trivializing the story grew weaker as the repetition sank in and another grieving mother or father demanded attention. God is about the business of resurrection: turning grief to joy. Yesterday John was beheaded and

Jesus was rejected; today we are learning to heal the sick and endure our own rejections. Tomorrow there will be another resounding defeat, and God will say, "Oh but wait, I'm not done. I have more in my community to rise up and address this."

We gather together to grow in discipleship and to be sent out. Maybe we are not going to cast out demons or heal people. But we are all called to proclaim the Good News. We are called to share the possibility of the kingdom. Rejection is a given, but in between rejections there are remarkable successes, because God is the resurrecting One.

Holy Jesus, you sent many into the world to proclaim your kingdom on earth. Send us, equip us, and walk with us so that everyone can learn of your abundant love. Amen.