

In my hometown, there's a beautiful creek, echoing bluffs, fall leaves that almost rival the ones up here. But, that same beautiful town had its race riots back in the early 1900s, became a sundown town the state energy company wouldn't send its black technicians to, and bore the nickname of "Most Racist Town in America." That lovely body of water running through town is called Crooked Creek. I had a tshirt as a kid from the annual Crooked Creek Crawdad Days, but all those hard Cs were replaced with Ks. **K**rooked **K**reek **K**rawdad Days. That design was made, reviewed, approved, and sold with three big Ks in a row. Arkansas's more than that, of course. I have good and non-offensive memories of my home state, but it's also far from perfect. Just about any identity outside of the white Christian nationalist-defined norm was plenty reason to ostracize someone. But the bright spots in Arkansas's history are fraught, too, often because they only needed to shine bright because of the surrounding darkness.

Central High remains the most famous school in the state thanks to the pivotal role it played in desegregation. I remember talking with my grandmother about those famous pictures of a single black kid surrounded by screaming white faces outside the school. She gently reminded me that just because those pictures were in black and white didn't mean they were ancient history. She explained why that moment had to happen; talked about Southern leaders like Bull Conner and George Wallace; reminded me that most of the students, some of the adults, and the hateful ideology in those "ancient" pictures were still alive; and they were just as riled up as they were that day but had learned to shut up about it in public. Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys is in one of those pictures, a man who went on to make a fortune off the physical labor of the (mostly black) men he "owns." The Arkansas State Flag still bears a star representing the Confederacy. Successful shops along highways sell Confederate-themed bikinis, teddy bears, Christmas Cards, and a 16" x 20" old-timey poster that reads, "We Shoot Every Third Yankee; the Second One Just Left."

I've got so many examples like these that I sometimes wonder if the Confederacy actually lost the Civil War. Confederates certainly didn't go away, but how well they hid reminds me of that Baudelaire quote, "The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he doesn't exist." The Confederacy's ideals are alive and well. They never died. They bided their time and got away with what they could and dared the federal government and preachers and non-whites to do something about it. It took a lot of work for me to unlearn and then relearn much of what I thought I knew, and that work's not done. Not everyone I grew up with had the same opportunities I did that helped with all that un- and re-learning, so not everyone did the un- and re-learning. Of course, it's easy to call out the South for their current and historical hate, but y'all, just like bigotry didn't magically stop at Appomattox, it didn't stop at the Mason-Dixon, either. I'm still amazed at how many folks up here don't know that Binghamton was once the nationwide capital of the KKK.

Which is all to say, given how \*everything's\* been going, I should've known this was coming: the DOJ just dismissed more than 50 school desegregation cases. ICE continues to stack up human rights violations, including beating a man for not showing them his papers, and they have the Supreme Court's blessing to carry out their terrorizing campaign based solely on race. I fear that because so much awful's happening all at once, we're losing track of all the awful; some're even ignoring it out of exhaustion or fear or the painful possibility that we might not care as much as we say we do. And some just plain enjoy all the awful. Anyone else tired of "winning?"

There's a disturbing trend that's flying under a lot of radars: this year alone, 10 black people have been found hanged in public places, the majority of them ruled as suicides with very little investigation. In a nation peppered with Flock cameras and mass surveillance, one would think the causes would be easy to find, but alas, they've been no help. Now look, I don't know how many of those were lynchings and how many weren't, but given our nation's history and the emboldened glee in the suffering of non-white people, I would think black people hanging from trees would elicit a bit more concern from our supposedly enlightened country. Or, as many trying to bring attention to these deaths have put it, "Black people don't hang themselves."

In a recent Psychology Today article, Dr. Isha Metsger says, "When Black bodies show up hanging in public spaces and cases are closed in 72 hours with no autopsy, no phone recovered, no interview with the person who found the body, and seemingly no questions asked ... communities are not being paranoid, suspicious, or irrational when they ask questions." When we talk about lynching, it's vital to remember that, while the term evokes images of hangings, it's not

limited to that. The NAACP defines lynching as the public killing of an individual without due process, often by a mob and often in order to control or intimidate a group. Public hangings absolutely fit the bill, but they aren't all lynchings can be. ICE's killings are a kind of lynching, too, and that law enforcement's involvement only strengthens the comparison to lynchings in the past.

Jesus was and remains notorious for spending his time with all the supposedly wrong people. He didn't try to woo the powerful or the centurion or the soldier. He spent his days with good, ol' fashioned sinners. With charisma and a following like his, he could've been great, but he insisted that his place was with the oppressed, the hated, the targeted. He was to remind us of our humanity and what that means for how we treat each other. Jesus spent his time with the lowest outcasts and really only dealt with the powerful when he couldn't avoid it. His place and his ministry were with the parts of society "regular" people scapegoated. His place was with those on crosses not on thrones.

There's an old theology that says when God became human, God sorta pulled us up. And in getting pulled up, being human became a little cooler, more elevated, maybe even more sacred than we already were. And, so that *all* of humanity was lifted up, God became incarnate in a low place indeed -- the child of an unwed mother belonging to a sliver of humankind in a backwater province under the thumb of an empire. Jesus wasn't born with a silver spoon; he was born in sniffing distance of the leavings of livestock. It's tempting to look to leaders for the kind of guidance God would give, but if we take the Bible seriously, it's unusual for God to guide us from the top. Usually, God guides us from right by our side or, more often, from the absolute bottom of society's heap. Decrees and orders almost never speak for God; but the cries of those who fear the noose, the badge, the histories unburied preach to high Heaven, should we open our ears to hear them.

That's where we'll find Christ. Not in the halls of power, though I'm sure he'd have something to say to them. We'll find him in the voices of those crying out in the wilderness, the ones living in fear of what will happen to them if good Christians stay quiet, the ones begging us to stand up and do something with all the historical power we've got at our backs. Stop living like we deserve that historical power. Or, as Paul puts it, in humility, regard others as better than you and look to the interests of others. Because we don't follow an emperor god. We follow a god hanged on a tree.