

Remembering a 19th-century lynching near my church

## **A historian contacted us about a tour of sites where mobs had lynched people—including the locust tree across from our sanctuary.**

By [David Williams](#)

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A locust tree in Maryland. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Famartin](#).

I opened up the email late in the evening, one forwarded to me by the web admin of our little church. It was one of those messages from the website that we get every now and again, as someone tries to be in touch with the church. This one from a local historian in the county who was doing an event in our little town through the local historical society and wanted to know if we'd be willing to connect with him about it.

The event: a lynching tour. In June of 1880, a black man in Poolesville, Maryland, named George Peck was accused of molesting a white girl. He was arrested, but a mob formed, overpowered the arresting officer, and lynched him. A *Washington Post* article describing the event gives a very specific location for his death: a locust tree, in a field directly across the road from a Presbyterian church. According to the article, the body was still hanging from the tree on Sunday morning as worshipers were going to church.

There is and has been only one Presbyterian church in Poolesville. Mine.

The lynching happened just yards from the sweet little sanctuary of the church I pastor. Right there, the passions of an inflamed mob, and a man murdered.

It felt like such a terrible thing, so brutish and horrific, so close to a space that is sacred to me. It felt like a violation. It felt hard and insurmountable. How could such a monstrous event happen, right there in front of the church?

At the same time I encountered this difficult truth about the history of our town, I was reading Howard Thurman's *Meditations of the Heart*. Thurman was the radically nonviolent Christian pastor and theologian who helped inspire the civil rights movement. As a black man growing up in the American South in the early 20th century, Thurman would have felt the reality of segregation and racial bias all too well.

And yet in him and from him, there's this powerful and incongruous calmness. He was able to encounter an often violent culture where many considered him less than human, and still thrive, claiming his humanity in a way that could not be broken. That strength rose from his faith. In *Meditations of the Heart*, Thurman writes:

The edge of hope that constantly invades the seasoned grounds of despair, the faith that keeps watch at the doors through which pass all the labors of my life and heart for what is right and true, the impulse to forgive and to seek forgiveness even when the injury is sharp and clear—these and countless other things make me know that by day and by night my life is surrounded by the love of God.

For all of the horror, violence, and ignorance in the world, that radical orientation towards God's grace can be a transforming thing. It's a strength that goes deep, and

changes all that we are, even in the face of the very hardest things.

It's a good thing to recall, when we encounter challenging times. Or when we are called to remember that which we would rather forget.

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