

"Let us Look at Jim Crow for the Criminal He Is"

Four days before she made her bus stand, Rosa Parks attended a packed mass meeting at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church to hear Dr. T.M. Howard speak. A key organizer around the Emmett Till case, Howard had helped locate witnesses, and Emmett's mother Mamie Till had stayed at his house during the trial. Howard had come before a packed mass meeting in Montgomery because the two men who had killed Till, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, had been acquitted by an all-white jury, and Howard was touring to raise attention. Parks was filled with anger and despair as she listened to Howard describe the lynching of Emmett Till and the killings of Mississippians George Lee and Lamar Smith for trying to register to vote. Dexter Avenue's young pastor, a 26 year old Martin Luther King, hosted the meeting, introducing Howard and giving the benediction.

Rosa Parks was sickened, angry, depressed, horrified. She had been fighting for years to get justice for black people under the law — Recy Taylor and Gertrude Perkins who'd been raped, Viola White and Claudette Colvin who had been arrested for resisting on the bus. She'd sought protection for black people and particularly black men from false charges — like the Scottsboro boys and 16-year-old Jeremiah Reeves. A young black minister that Raymond knew had been killed for appearing to make an advance at a white woman, as had their neighbor Hilliard Brooks for resisting on the bus. Parks was discouraged. Most of these cases just got swept under the rug. With Till, people had brought enough attention — an incredible amount of attention — so there had actually been a trial. And yet still, Till's killers were acquitted. These men who had killed a 14-year-old went free.

Four days later, when bus driver James Blake told her to move from her seat, Parks thought of Emmett Till and, "pushed as far as she could be pushed," she refused. Many years later, she told Emmett Till's mother that she had thought of him at this moment.

In key ways, then, the Montgomery bus boycott was not just a reaction to bus segregation but also to this pattern of injustice in the criminal justice system — and Rosa Parks' determination to take a stand against it. Parks understood that it was not just about this lynching or this acquittal but about a structure that allowed and protected discrimination, segregation, the differential treatment of black people under the law. The problem was much bigger than Bryant and Milam and so the need was to start somewhere in attacking that structure. As Reverend Johns (the pastor who served at Dexter Avenue Church before Martin Luther King) observed, "Rosa Parks was one of those rare people who could catch a vision."

Parks knew well what could happen to a woman in police custody and the physical and sexual violence that could result — as well as the potential economic consequences of being arrested. And there was little to suggest that anything good would result. She had made stands before, others had made stands, and nothing had happened. Still she summoned the courage — the courage of perseverance — and stood fast.

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<http://rosaparksbiography.org/bio>

Blake chose to have her arrested, rather than simply evicting her from the bus as he had done previously. While Rosa Parks is often cast as quiet, she believed in the power of speaking back. When the arresting officers asked why she didn't get up, she questioned back, "Why do you all push us around?" One responded, "I don't know but the law is the law and you're under arrest." Parks thought to herself, "Let us look at Jim Crow for the criminal he is and what he had done to one life multiplied millions of times over these United States."

Video: [Found footage of T.R.M. Howard discussing White Citizens Councils in Mississippi while on tour in LA.](#)