

Herod's Rules, Jesus' Reign  
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He [Herod] sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it, and they went and told Jesus. Matthew 14:10-12

The martyrdom of John the Baptist is a shocking story for us as Americans. We are used to times of plenty, religious freedom, and very little opposition to Christianity in general. John's beheading reminds us of the upside-down nature of the Christian faith. We profess that the heavenly kingdom is present among us because it is located wherever Jesus is. And yet, the heavenly kingdom doesn't look like much. Jesus' reign doesn't seem all that powerful if his forerunner, John the Baptist, lost his head for the sake of his faith. By contrast, Herod seems to be the one in charge. He's got a palace, servants, and the authority to swing the sword against people like John the Baptist.

And yet, this story kind of captures the heart of the gospel in a strange way. The Church is often not what we expect it to be. Victory through defeat is what Christianity is all about. Our eyes see the tragedy of what has happened to John the Baptist and yet faith perceives that eternal life was already his because of the faith he had in Christ Jesus. Jesus is put to death on a cross and yet the cross becomes the doorway to life for all believers because it is there where sin is atoned for, Satan is defeated, and death is undone. Similarly, we would confess that the Heavenly Kingdom is on the move among the people of God. And yet, what does this kingdom look like? It doesn't look like much! It looks like tired sinners who are receiving simple gifts: bread, wine, water, and the word.

There's a brilliant, hopeful conclusion to the story of John's martyrdom. At the end of the text we read that John's followers "laid his body in a tomb." This is not just a historical detail. The next time we hear about a tomb will be when Jesus is laid in a tomb. And we know that death cannot hold the Lord of Life. Jesus walks out of that same tomb. One day John the Baptist, you and I, will walk out of our tomb just as Jesus did. He is the firstfruits of our resurrection and John's disciples no doubt laid their rabbi to rest in anticipation of the resurrection. This is what it means to have real hope. The Christian can grieve and mourn, yes, but we do so knowing that Christ is risen from the dead. One day we will see with our eyes what we, even now, confess: because Jesus is risen, resurrection life belongs to you and me as well.