

“Statement Delivered at
the Prayer Pilgrimage Protesting
the Electrocution of Jeremiah Reeves”

6 April 1958
Montgomery, Ala.

Shortly after 2 P.M. on Easter Sunday, King led fifteen black ministers on a one-block procession from Dexter Church to the state capitol, where he addressed a crowd of two thousand people.¹

1. This document, which appears in all capital letters in its original form, has been standardized for readability. Before King's address, audience members read in unison from a leaflet that "extolled

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We assemble here this afternoon on the steps of this beautiful capitol building in an act of public repentance for our community for committing a tragic and unsavory injustice. A young man, Jeremiah Reeves, who was little more than a child when he was first arrested, died in the electric chair for the charge of rape. Whether or not he was guilty of this crime is a question that none of us can answer. But the issue before us now is not the innocence or guilt of Jeremiah Reeves. Even if he were guilty, it is the severity and inequality of the penalty that constitutes the injustice. Full grown white men committing comparable crimes against Negro girls are rare ever punished, and are never given the death penalty or even a life sentence. It was the severity of Jeremiah Reeves penalty that aroused the Negro community, not the question of his guilt or innocence.

But not only are we here to repent for the sin committed against Jeremiah Reeves, but we are also here to repent for the constant miscarriage of justice that we confront everyday in our courts. The death of Jeremiah Reeves is only the precipitating factor for our protest, not the causal factor. The causal factor lies deep down in the dark and dreary past of our oppression. The death of Jeremiah Reeves is but one incident, yes a tragic incident, in the long and desolate night of our court injustice.

It is regrettable but true that in almost any session of our city, county and state courts one can see all of the injustices which the prophet Amos so bitterly decried and which he predicted would mean the ruin of their once glorious civilization. Here Negroes are robbed openly with little hope of redress. We are fined and jailed often in defiance of law. Right or wrong, a Negro's word has little weight against a white opponent's. And if the Negro insists on the right of his cause, as opposed to a white man's he is often violently treated.

There is another injustice in the courts which is equally as bad. Cases in which only Negroes are involved are handled frivolously, without regard to justice or proper correction. We deplore this type of injustice as much as we do the injustice which the Negro confronts in his court relations with whites.

We appeal this afternoon to our white brothers, whether they are private citizens or public officials, to courageously meet this problem. This is not a political issue: it is ultimately a moral issue. It is a question of the dignity of man.

We assemble here because we still have faith in Alabama and its vast possibilities in the area of Christian brotherhood. We do not believe that the vast majority of white Southerners condone the type of injustice that we are faced with. The persons who perpetuate such injustices do not, we are thoroughly confident, speak for the South. They speak only for a willful but vocal minority. There are thousands of white southerners of goodwill whose voices are yet unheard, whose course is yet unclear and whose courageous acts are yet unseen.²

the ideologies of democracy, and reaffirmed the Negro belief that 'to compel the segregation of the Children of God . . . is sinful defiance of God's will' (George Prentice, "Handclapping Negroes Meet on Capitol Lawn," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 7 April 1958).

2. On 12 April three hundred white ministers and church leaders from Montgomery released a statement condemning the Easter protest and recommending that such mass meetings, "with exaggerated emphasis on wrongs and grievances" be replaced "by conversations among responsible lead-

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In the name of God, in the interest of human dignity and for the interest of human dignity and for the cause of democracy, we appeal to these thousands to gird their courage, to speak out and act on their basic convictions.

As we stand in this historic spot let us as Negroes be challenged to accept our responsibilities by continually improving our personal standards. Let us work at every hour for cleanliness, good manners, chastity, home improvement and neighborhood improvement. If we have shortcomings, let us face up to them honestly.

We would not close without asking God's forgiveness for those who unjustly treat us. We are still inflicted with economic injustice—Father forgive them. Simply because we want to be free there are those who will threaten our lives, cripple us with economic reprisals, and bomb our homes and churches—but Father forgive them. There are still those hooded perpetrators of violence who will stop us out on some wayside road and beat us, leaving us half dead—but Father forgive them. Right here in Montgomery, in spite of all our efforts, thousands of us are refused the right to become registered voters—but Father forgive them. Our children, merely desiring equal education, are spat upon, cursed and kicked hither and yonder—but Father forgive them. Let us go away devoid of bitterness, and with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive. It is our hope that in recognizing the necessity for struggle and suffering, we will make of it a virtue. If only to save ourselves from bitterness, we need vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transfigure ourselves and American society. If some of us must go to jail for the cause of freedom, let us enter it as Gandhi urged his countrymen, "As the bridegroom enters the bride's chamber," that is with some trepidation but with great expectation.

It is significant that we assemble here on Easter Day. Easter reminds us of two things. On the one hand, it reminds us that there is something wrong with human nature and human history. It reminds us that man is separated from God and separated from his brother, which leads to the tragedy of Good Friday. On the other hand it reminds us that God is in Christ seeking to reconcile the world unto himself. It reminds us that God ultimately rules history. So Easter is a day of hope. It is a day that says to us that the forces of evil and injustice cannot survive. Truth may be crucified and justice buried, but one day they will rise again. We must live and face death if necessary with that hope.

TD. MLKP-MBU: Box 2.

ers of both races." That evening King, Abernathy, and Graetz issued a reply accepting the ministers' invitation to dialogue and requesting that they propose a date and place for such a discussion. A spokesman for the white ministers declined to comment on the reply, and no such meeting occurred ("Ministerial Group Scores Easter Negro Mass Meet" and "King's Group Accepts Invitation to Talks," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 13 April 1958; see also "Negro Clergy Asks Names For Meeting," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 15 April 1958).