The Surprising and Continuing Decline of the Death Penalty in America
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Since the mid-1990s use of capital punishment has declined by over two-thirds. This is despite continued widespread support for the abstract concept of retribution, growth in the numbers of evangelicals, eight years of the George W. Bush presidency, and various restrictions on civil liberties in the name of the war on terror. What has caused this dramatic and surprising decline? Americans have suddenly discovered that the death penalty is a government program run by a large and not very efficient bureaucracy. It doesn't always work well, it costs a lot, and it harbors tremendous racial and class biases. This talk will bring to light the role of ideas in causing dramatic social changes and highlight the roles of diffuse social networks, often centered on college campuses, in highlighting new elements of an old debate that have caused a tremendous judicial revolution.