

1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-48

April 18, 2021

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

It seemed too good to be true. They had heard accounts of Jesus having been raised from the dead. The women who had been to the tomb early on that Sunday morning had found it to be empty except for a couple of angels who told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. The other followers treated the women's story as what Luke calls 'an idle tale.' But then Cleopas and another follower were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus when someone joined them on the journey. This person helped them understand how the story of God in scripture connected with their story, and then when they stopped and were sharing a meal together, they recognized the risen Lord as he was breaking bread with them. They hurried back to Jerusalem to tell the good news to the other followers of Jesus. It all seemed too good to be true!

The gospel account then tells us that as his followers were talking about several resurrection encounters, that Jesus himself appeared in their midst. At first, they thought he might be a ghost. They knew he had been brutally killed. But Jesus shows them his hands and feet which bore the marks of crucifixion. He invites them to touch him to see that unlike a ghost, he had flesh and bones. Luke then adds that our risen Lord eats a piece of fish in front of them. This resurrection account includes such physical details to help followers like us understand that the risen Lord wasn't just a spirit. Actually, a focus on the physical comes up rather frequently in the biblical witness. It was a pretty important part of the sacred story that God brought about the physical release of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and from exile in Babylon, that many times God provided food for the hungry and healing for those who were physically sick. The wellbeing of body and spirit are closely related.

However, with that understanding, we have to come to grips with what is and is not physically different after Jesus is raised from the dead. Resurrection faith offers us great hope in this life and beyond, however, even after the first Easter, there were still innocent people being killed unjustly as Jesus had been. Even though our Lord had given of himself through the breaking of the bread, there were still serious problems of hunger. There were a lot of people who were sick, whose needs were not automatically addressed when Jesus exited the tomb. As amazing as Jesus' resurrection was and is, that act of God did not wipe out physical oppression and suffering. We know all too well that there are still killings and hunger and illness in our world even after almost two thousand Easter days. The power of suffering and death still has a strong grip on this world. How do we understand the resurrection in order to be witnesses regarding it?

That there is still physical suffering in this world does not mean that God is indifferent to it. Rather God gives great latitude for human choices in the world, and many of those choices leave great brokenness in their wake. The scope of the brokenness around us could leave us dispirited and feeling powerless to do anything about it. But our risen Lord shows how God can make a new path even when we seem to be facing the ultimate dead end. Resurrection hope speaks to us and can speak through us of the power of love over hatred, of peace over violence, of compassion over indifference, of forgiveness over bitterness, of joyful living over deathly fear.

There were a couple of stories in the Philadelphia Inquirer this past week that I would like to share with you. One recounted the life and values of a woman named Steveanna Wynn, who died last Saturday. She had grown up as part of a poor family in a small southwestern Virginia town. As she reached adulthood, there had been times when she struggled to feed her own family. When she came to the Philadelphia area, she began to work at a small community food cooperative, that under her passionate leadership grew into the Share Food Program that now is equipped to distribute over five million pounds of food assistance each month. Her passion for the work was something to behold. The male forklift drivers loading boxes of food didn't always want to step aside to allow Steveanna to join in such work, so she got herself an all-purple forklift that they were too macho to want to

use, so it would always be available for her use. Her language was at times rough, but her heart was dedicated to those caught in difficulty who she always wanted to be treated with the dignity and respect as if they were beloved children of God, because they were. So, she would go from the warehouse to a meeting with corporate executives to get them involved, to conversations with needy families to testifying before the U.S. Department of Agriculture all in one day. She gave witness to the vision that indifference could not be an option even if every aspect of problem of hunger could not be solved on her watch. ¹

Another story told about Tarik Khan, a family nurse practitioner, who administers COVID vaccine shots at a community clinic in Philadelphia. The vaccine has to be stored in very cold temperatures. Once the doses are thawed, they have to be administered in a limited number of hours or else they have to be thrown away. When people don't show up for their appointments to get vaccinated, sometimes there are doses of the vaccine that would have to be discarded, which Khan views as a sin. So, after his normal work hours, he goes over a list of homebound seniors who have not gotten vaccinated yet, contacts them and tells them he wants to come by and vaccinate them that evening. Witnessing to the worth of each person, he wears pins that say Black lives matter and love is love, along with a necklace with Christian, Muslim, and Jewish symbols to go with his lab coat. He drives to each of their homes in a rush against time, in a push against disease and despair. ²

Steveanna and Tarik used their own unique situations and abilities to treat others as God's beloved children. The gospel witness tells us that the resurrection of our Lord is not too good to be true. God's expansive love and power are not too good to be true. Resurrection hope can inspire us to be witnesses to it, sharing our Alleluias in word and deed. None of us will solve all the physical problems of violence and hunger and illness that are around us, but inaction and indifference are counter to a resurrection witness. God's love does not give up. Look for ways in your own context, with your own capacities through word or deed to speak of hope, compassion, love, and wholeness. The work of Easter continues. God's liberating, life-giving force has been set loose in the world. As we are inspired by resurrection hope, we can share that with others so that, by God's grace, others may come to believe that such realities are not too good to be true. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.inquirer.com/news/stevanna-wynn-obituary-share-hunger-philadelphia-20210412.html>

² <https://www.inquirer.com/news/inq2/philadelphia-covid-19-vaccine-leftover-doses-20210414.html>

