

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IS POSSIBLE?

Mark 16: 1-8; Acts 10: 34-43

What do you believe is possible? The earliest accounts of the resurrection emphasize the unbelievability of it. The women disciples are first on the scene. They're there to provide some important follow up burial requirements for one they love dearly. What are these requirements? To bury the person properly, you wash his body and perfume it. Jesus dies Friday afternoon, just before the Sabbath is to begin when all work has to stop. If they're going to rescue his body off the cross from being left there to rot, they have to work fast. Once permission is granted, all they have time to do is wrap the body and leave it in a tomb generously donated by a wealthy admirer who also manages to have the body wrapped. Once the Sabbath is over, though, they must deal with the body more properly, taking the time to care for it by perfuming it for the process of decomposition. That's Sunday morning the earliest.

Now imagine what these women and other disciples are dealing with here. Imagine the trauma of seeing someone you love and someone in whom you've placed all kinds of hopes and dreams, tortured and beaten to a pulp, dying in agony from early morning to late afternoon until he breathes his last. What kinds of sensory images and thoughts would be filling your head? How could you sleep, eat or go on with life as if everything is normal? How do you get over it and move on?

I apologize for being so dramatic about it all, but if we're going to really understand the miracle of faith in the resurrection, we need to understand the reality of the situation from the inside. What's possible when your whole world has collapsed and fallen apart? What's possible when you have been confronted by the worst elements of injustice, cruelty and racial atrocity, and I say racial, because it's Rome crucifying a Jew whom they call king as a way of not only humiliating Jesus but reminding Jews that they're dirt and they're prisoners of a superior race. What's possible when your faith in God, humanity and the future has taken a major hit and you can't get past it?

The earliest accounts of the resurrection make it very real. The women are first on the scene. And they're shocked by what they witness. The tomb is wide open and there's no body! What's happened to it? In our scripture reading, there's also man in a white robe sitting in the tomb. When they see him, their shock turns into terror. He tells them to calm down and listen. Their beloved Jesus who was horribly tortured and killed is now alive. 'Go tell the rest of the disciples' he tells them. 'You will see him soon', he says... Ok. Ok. Come on now. What would you think if you witnessed all this after experiencing what they just experienced two days before? If I had been through such traumatic and awful life events, with major mental and

emotional exhaustion, I wouldn't trust what I'd seen and heard if this was it. How is it possible that the same person they saw so brutally pulverized and dead could be alive and on the move? Sure, maybe he said some things about resurrection, but so what! Let's be real. The world of power and force in all its brutal cruelty and domination has won again. It's the same old story played out. Let's not pretend it's anything else... Unless...

We're told the women flee the tomb in terror, but also 'amazement.' The word amazement means maybe something is possible. Amazement is both fear but also an opening to possibility. But what exactly is possible? Are miracles possible? Sure, this strange guy in the tomb said Jesus was alive, but was this guy real? Who was he anyway?

And so, we're told, they say nothing to no one because they're afraid – afraid of being called crazy, afraid of having anger thrown at them for raising wild hopes. Besides, they need to process what they've seen and heard. Can it be? Everyone knows that brutal power wins the day. Resurrection of a dead man destroyed so graphically is impossible, even if he be the Messiah of God. He's still a human being. And a world where genuine justice, fairness, peace and reconciliation between enemies happens; from where they're at, none of that's possible... Or is it?

What do you think? We're here today, after all, some of us claiming to be followers of this same Jesus, here on Easter Sunday morning, thousands of years later, mouthing words and sentiments proclaiming the resurrection not only as possible but real. But do we believe it?

Well, our second reading locates the very same group of disciples just months after that first Easter Sunday morning. Peter is the head disciple speaking for them all. He's speaking to a group of people, the same group who would have voted *en masse* to have Jesus crucified. Peter tells them that it's not too late. God still loves them and wants to open a door to a different future for them. Even though they've all got blood on their hands – Peter as much as them because even though Peter didn't hammer in a nail, he denied he knew Jesus and took off, while the crowds cheered and jeered and threw stuff at Jesus. Everyone is implicated. Everyone is complicit.

And yet, proclaims Peter: Jesus came to you and us with a message of peace. And even after he was brutalized and executed in the most awful and humiliating way possible, he has risen from the dead. We have seen him and eaten with him, and we have found our way to new faith and hope in the power of his resurrecting love to change the world, beginning with us. And you know how that transformation happens, he asks? You must receive the power of the resurrection yourselves. Your resurrection begins with the experience of forgiveness, forgiveness of the disease of sin which kills you from the inside as much as it killed Jesus on the outside. Fear, hate, indifference, selfishness... they're not just attitudes. They're a disease that lives and grows inside you before it spreads outwards, and it can only be destroyed by the

superior power of love. Unless you name it and claim it and open your heart to be healed by forgiveness from the very one you rejected and destroyed so brutally, you will never find true peace and you will never become a healing agent for peace in the world.

Wow! Imagine that! Only months after these traumatic events, Jesus' followers were making a connection between Jesus' resurrection and the resurrection of faith, hope and love that can transform their world. Believing in the resurrection is parallel to opening your spirit to become powered with the kind of faith, hope and love that can change the world beginning with you. Is this possible? Is this real? Let me tell a story, a true story.

Azim Khamisa is a father. In 1995, Azim's only son, Tariq – a 20-year-old student – was shot and killed while delivering pizzas in San Diego, California. His killer was just a teenager - Tony Hicks. Tony became the first 14-year-old to stand trial as an adult in the state of California. He received a 25-year prison sentence.

“When I got the phone call saying Tariq was dead I kind of left my body,” says Azim. “The pain was too much to bear. It was like a nuclear bomb went off inside my heart. There was no solace to be found.” But Azim was also part of a community of faith – A Sufi Muslim community of faith. He turned to his faith ever more deeply seeking a way to live, to go on and find new meaning and purpose given the new reality he had to live. He only survived, he says, through worship and prayer. He also says that after several weeks he felt something else rise up in him something totally shocking and yet strangely life-giving – forgiveness. Somehow he was given the gift of believing that there were victims on both ends of the gun.

Azim describes his son's killer as having the face of a child. He was just 14 years old and part of a street gang. “In my faith,” says Azim, “on the fortieth day after a death you are encouraged to channel your grief into compassionate deeds: deeds which provide high octane fuel for the soul's forward journey.” Azim decided to start a foundation – the Tariq Khamisa Foundation. This was a way, Azim says, “to create spiritual currency for my son, as well as give myself a sense of purpose.”

Now here's where things get even more unbelievable. Azim reached out to the grandfather and guardian of his son's murderer: Ples Felix. He told Ples that he felt no animosity towards his grandson. This unbelievable act of forgiving love reached deep inside Ples' soul. It helped him heal paralyzing feelings of blame and shame, so he could take the hand offered him. Azim and Ples could not be more different as people. Azim wears a pin-striped suit. Ples wears jeans and his hair is down to his waist. But they have become friends, and more. They're like brothers.

A big part of their brotherhood is that they share a common purpose. Here's how Azim describes it: “We believe that in every crime there is an opportunity to improve society by learning how to prevent that crime from happening again. Tariq was a victim of Tony, but Tony

was a victim of American society – and society is a mirror image of each and every one of us.” We’re all complicit in crucifixion as Peter told the crowd listening. We’re all responsible for the world we live in.

Azim and Ples give talks to different groups and especially in schools. Kids are totally captivated and moved as they listen. We’re all part of the system in some way, they say. Unless we name it and claim it, we will not walk through the door into authentic healing and transformation.

Five years after the murder, Azim met Tony himself. He says that it was a profoundly healing experience. Tony was genuinely remorseful and ashamed. Azim told him that when he got out of prison there would be a job waiting for him at the Tariq Khamisa Foundation. Here’s how Azim explains himself: “You do forgiveness for yourself, because it moves you on. The fact that it can also heal the perpetrator is the icing on the cake.” Tony began studying in prison. Azim believed that Tony could be saved if there was enough love and support for him. In return, Tony could rise up to save thousands of other children by his example. Azim wrote a letter to the Governor asking for Tony’s sentence to be commuted.

After meeting with Azim, Tony told his grandfather Ples, this: “That is a special man. I shot and killed his one and only son and yet he can sit with me, encourage me and offer me a job.” Even though Tariq was brutally murdered, the transforming power of forgiving love was winning by creating powerful new life against the crucifying realities of a world of fear, hate and hopelessness. An only child is killed. But divine love could rise up stronger still in the face of that kind of crucifying experience.

In 2018, almost 25 years later, Tony was released from prison... He joined Azim and Ples and together they now devote much of their time to promoting the vision of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation – committed to “stopping children from killing children.” Wow! Isn’t this an amazing story? And it’s real! It’s true! It redefines what’s possible!

But how does it challenge us in our own lives? How is the resurrection of Jesus going to become concrete faith and hope in the power of love in your life and in mine? To believe the resurrection of Jesus is real is no less astonishing than believing real transformation in our lives and in the world around us can become real. Believing the resurrection of a dead man is real, is no crazier than believing faith and hope in the power of love can really change the world beginning with me and us is real. Beyond the self-imposed limits of our fear, our blaming, our fatalism or our indifference, we can become vehicles of the resurrecting power of love in the world around us. Our world needs such resurrecting love more than ever. Do you believe in the resurrection?...

Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah! Amen.