

Dear friends in Christ



“The Full, Real Deal, Body of Christ”

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
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Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4;
1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

Nikki King grew up in a hardscrabble hamlet in one of the hollows of Appalachia. Like many rural communities, it was awash in drug and alcohol addiction. She reports, “At 14 I could’ve pointed out everybody who would be dead.”

At the urging of her grandmother, who, with her grandfather had raised her, she left home with a few meager belongings at the age of seventeen and headed for the University of Kentucky.

She remembered one day in a high school class, the teacher asking the students what they wanted to be upon graduation. One boy said, “A drawer.”

“You mean an artist?”

“No, a draw-er’ – someone who draws disability checks and doctor-shops for OxyContin prescriptions.” Reselling those pills could bring in substantial cash. This was to be his career.¹

After her grandmother, Sue, had died, Nikki received little support or understanding from her grandfather concerning her potential. She had a

¹ Beth Macy, “At 14 I Could Have Pointed out Everybody Who Would be Dead,” *The Atlantic*, May 2020. 56.

4.0 grade point average and a high ACT score. He thought that the AP courses on her report cards meant that she was slow, in remedial classes. He judged that a community college would be just fine for her. So, in the middle of the night Nikki packed some stuff and headed off to the University of Kentucky. She had been planning the get-away in her senior year, saving up money by working in a comic book store.²

After a friend's mom had relapsed while on probation, this mom was deathly afraid that the state would take her children. Her drug dealer had told the woman that she could clear the drugs from her system by drinking Clorox. It killed her. At that point, her grandmother urged her, "Just go, and don't come back."³

Nikki had internalized her grandmother's hope, however, that she would one day come back to help people. And she would.

By 2017 Nikki had graduated and was making a difference. She was the lead data cruncher on a hospital-wide task force at Margaret Mary Health, a community hospital in Batesville. Indiana.

She had been unable to do this work in Kentucky. Too young. Too female. No one would listen to her. Now, a decade after leaving home, after 800,000 opioid deaths nationally – Nikki is now a National Rural Health Association fellow.

Though one head of a local Kiwanis Club objected to giving addicts rides to treatment facilities, "I think when they relapse, we should let them die and take their organs" -- Nikki has "figured out a way to get treatment to people in remote, underfunded areas."⁴ With their organs intact.

Many politicians say we should do something about drug overdose. It's "absolutely terrible," they say. But most have done nothing to learn about the problem, beyond catch phrases and slogans. They've brought no funding to bear on the problem. It, for far too many is all talk. As illusory as a phantom.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The passage from Luke's gospel presents the risen Christ as flesh and blood reality. The Real Deal. He eats fish with the disciples. He shows them his wounded hands and feet. What ghost does that? Whatever this mystery is, and how Luke explains it, I haven't the foggiest. Beyond my pay grade.

So, here's my take on this. One way to understand what Luke might be saying, especially in the second half of his witness, the Book of Acts, is that the Church is Spirit-empowered to be the Real Deal flesh and blood Risen Christ. The physical, actual body, blood and bones – wounds and all. Remember, Luke and Acts are actually volumes one and two of the same work.

This is, in fact, what people seek still today. Flesh and blood difference-making. This is what hungry hearts seek to be a part of. Real Deal difference-making.

How all this happens? It's a holy mystery. I can't explain it and neither can you. All we can say is that the Resurrected Christ becomes real, as testified in the book of Acts, as the living Resurrection Community bears the wounds of one another, the wounds of its neighbors, the pain of the world.

Its all there in Matthew 25. The heartaches, the sufferings. To paraphrase Albert Schweitzer, the Risen Christ will reveal himself in the heartaches, the despair, the doubts. They shall pass through in his fellowship.

A faithful, obedient Church surely bears the same wounds, the same ministry. For that is what it is to let the suffering of others into your soul. Every bit as much as Nikki bears the wounds of her friends who have died of addiction. Every bit as much as she has borne the wounds of families rent asunder by addiction.

The same can be said for Beth Macy. Her ongoing journalist project to bring to America the full story of opioid addiction with all its ugliness and despair, She has also borne the wounds of Christ.

And as both the lives of these women testify to the hope and redemption taking place through their work, they give witness to the most profound Easter Joy. Sobriety is a flesh and blood possibility for many. One-day-at-a-time recovery works. Thanks to the Nikki Kings of this world, addiction treatment is more than political promise. Where there's no

way, Nikki King makes a way. Even if her rant goes, what her boss calls, “going all holler.”

The other day, a friend despairing of the emptying out of the traditional, mainline churches, said that traditional Protestantism had pretty much died in Pomona. No surprise. Most of those churches, when they slowly emptied out, barely left a mark. A number of congregations chose to flee that city. The Resurrection Community finds a way to stay.

This week at our diocesan Zoom meeting of clergy and our bishops and Canon to the Ordinary, Melissa, the featured speakers were from Habitat for Humanity. You all know this program. They build houses for those who, by normal market standards would not be able to get into permanent housing.

Habitat grew out of Koinonia Farm, an interracial intentional community of Christians in Americus, Georgia. The founder, Clarence Jordan, was a biblical scholar, inspired by that early community portrayed in the Book of Acts. It was begun back in the dark days of the KKK and the night riders, lynchings and cross burnings. This was in 1942. Despite the intimidation, this small band was determined to live out of the model in Acts, where all was shared, goods, mission, and the sufferings.

Out of this beginning, Jordan and Habitat’s eventual founders Millard and Linda Fuller developed the concept of “partnership housing.” “The concept centered on those in need of adequate shelter working side by side with volunteers to build decent, affordable houses. The houses would be built at no profit. New homeowners’ house payments would be combined with no-interest loans provided by supporters and money earned by fundraising to create “The Fund for Humanity,” which would then be used to build more homes.”⁵

This is flesh and blood Resurrection. Gospel reality that could only come from authentic community, gospel committed. Just like our small band putting together House of Hope.

The purpose of Bishop John in bringing this program to the clergy was to inspire “outside-the-box thinking on ways the Real Deal

⁵ <https://www.habitat.org/about/history>

Resurrected Christ through us might meet current need, today's task. The Real Deal.

Habitat now does much more than its original mission, though permanent housing for low-income families in need remains its central "wheel house." They're into housing condominiums, tiny houses, housing rehabilitation, even sober living homes.

Just across the street from our diocesan center, in Echo Park, have been the tents and tarps of some fifty or sixty homeless in Los Angeles. All up and down Wilshire Blvd. are scattered encampments of the homeless. The pandemic has only made this situation far worse. Some would say intolerable. About thirty to forty percent of these suffer from mental illness and addiction. About twenty-five percent are veterans. Right – support the troops! Until they get shot up, become mentally ill or have PTSD.

You guessed it, I'll be calling two of these Habitat presenters next week.

The Risen Christ is Real Deal, housing for the dispossessed. Flesh and blood reality. That's what folks want to see, to be part of.

Maybe it's endless meetings, assuaging fearful neighbors and mountains of paperwork that are today's Resurrection Wounds the community of faith bears today in America.

I came across an article in *Sojourners Magazine* this month on Fr. Daniel Berrigan. Most know of his work as a peace activist during the Vietnam War. Many know of his writing. All a piece of the Real Deal Resurrected Christ.

But this article brought to light an entirely different side of Daniel Berrigan, the pastoral side. He had an active ministry to the ill and dying during the AIDS crisis.⁶

Father Berrigan's time with the AIDS patients at St. Rose's Home in Manhattan, where most of the patients were Catholic, was to be among the terminally ill and dying.

⁶ Patrick Henry, "The Bread of Life in the Breach of Death," *Sojourners*, May, 2021.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

St. Rose's was simply 'a laboratory in dying,' a 'ship of fools' sailing on heroically while Berrigan and the other orderlies 'bail, row, weep, swab the decks, change beds, ferry in the newly arrived near dead, and try to keep sane'"7

Surely these servants of mercy were the Real Deal Risen Christ. This is what the gospel looks like. Here was the true church "enveloped by the ever-present stench of cancer," the gospel incarnate.

The staff was dedicated to "making people's lives bearable, comfortable, and lively for as long as they lasted." "No one is forced-fed...whether on religion, psycho-semantics, antics...and there are no state snoops because there is no state money."8

This is the Real Deal, flesh and blood Risen Christ. Fish and all.

Grant, O Lord, that where there is injury, we may pardon be. Grant, O Lord, that where there is abuse of authority under the cover of a badge, that we might justice be. Grant, O Lord, that where there is loneliness, we might companionship be. Grant, us O Lord, where gospel is lacking, we might gospel be. Amen