

## **Sermon, 15 April 2007—Second Sunday of Easter**

Acts 5:12-29; Psalm 111; Revelation 1:1-19; John 20:19-31

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In a recent issue of Newsweek we were given a lengthy face-off between Sam Harris, a denouncer of religion, professed atheist, and author of The End of Faith, and Rick Warren, a defender of religion, professed Christian, and pastor of Saddleback Church in California. The essay that introduced the sparring partners into the ring opened by recalling Blaise Pascal, a French mathematical genius who worked in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was a good choice, because Pascal is primarily remember as the author of the Pensees, a collection of notes for his strenuous and anxious defense of Christianity against the cynical sophisticates of his day. In those notes, Pascal poses his famous “Wager,” which the Newsweek article mentions, and whose proposed solution to doubt we will reflect on this morning.

Pascal starts by mocking the overconfident secularists of his day. “We know well enough,” he says, “how people in this frame of mind behave. They think they have made great efforts to learn when they have spent a few hours reading some book of the Bible and have questioned some ecclesiastic about the truths of the faith. After that they boast that they have sought without success among books and among men. But in fact I should say to them what I have often said: such negligence is intolerable. It is not a question here of the trifling interest of some stranger prompting such behavior. It is a question of ourselves and our all.”

Pascal goes on to place a ludicrously arrogant speech in the mouth of such a person. “I do not know who put me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I am myself. I am terribly ignorant about everything. I do not know what my body is, or my sense, or my soul, or even that part of

me which thinks what I am saying, which reflects about everything and about itself, and does not know itself any better than it knows anything else.

“I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in, and I find myself attached to one corner of this vast expanse without knowing why I have been put in this place rather than that, or why the brief span of life allotted to me should be assigned to one moment rather than another of all the eternity which went before me and all that which will come after me. I see only infinity on every side, hemming me in like an atom or like the shadow of a fleeting instant. All I know is that I must soon die, but what I know least about is this very death which I cannot evade.

“Just as I do not know whence I come, so I do not know whither I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into nothingness or into the hands of a wrathful God, but I do not know which of these two states is to be my eternal lot. Such is my state, full of weakness and uncertainty. And my conclusion from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of seeking what is to happen to me. Perhaps I might find some enlightenment in my doubts, but I do not want to take the trouble, nor take a step to look for it: and afterwards, as I sneer at those who are striving to this end...I will go without fear or foresight to face so momentous an event, and allow myself to be carried off limply to my death....”

Pascal throws up his French hands and says, “Who would wish to have as a friend a man who argued like that? ... Who could resort to him in adversity? ... Now what advantage is it to us to hear someone say that he has shaken off the yoke, that he does not believe there is a God watching over his actions, that he considers himself sole master of his behavior, and that he proposes to account for it to no one but himself? Does he think that

by so doing, he has henceforth won our full confidence, and made us expect from him consolation, counsel, and assistance in all life's needs? Do they think that they have given us pleasure by telling us that they hold our soul to be no more than wind or smoke, and saying it moreover in tones of pride and satisfaction? ... Is it not on the contrary something to be said sadly, as being the saddest thing in the world?"

We often misunderstand Thomas as one of the skeptics Pascal describes. I have quoted Pascal at length so you can hear the tone of a true skeptic, and a cynical one at that. The paradox of Thomas is this: though he receives a gentle rebuke, he asks the right question and makes the right demand. He is the hidden hero of this Gospel. The Evangelist gives this so-called doubter the climactic statement. Thomas is the one who finally sees Jesus for what Jesus truly is and praises him as Lord and God.

Thomas asks the right question and makes the right demand because Thomas asks to handle Jesus' body. Nothing is more crucial to the writer of this Gospel than the fact that the Word, who is with God and is God, became flesh—and not any generic flesh, but particularly Jesus of Nazareth. John's struggle was with Gnostic Christians. According to them, God would never contaminate himself by entering the very thing God was trying to free us from: our polluted fleshly existence. As they saw it, our goal is to free our divine spark to float back and dissolve into the divine primordial blissful and oblivious One; doing that, we would know and express our true nature. Christ's Incarnation was a projection—a depiction of grace, but not its presence—because to them, God could never participate in the mistakes and accidents of creation. Jesus was a holy hologram, through which, from the right angle and with the right savvy, you could have passed your hand.

There are to this day Christians who prefer their Jesus all God and not man. But the poison John saw there is this: if that is so, if the Christ is a shimmering mirage of spirit hovering over our desert, then we have been left alone after all, just as surely as we would be left alone if Jesus were all man and not God. If God was not with us in Jesus, Incarnation and Resurrection are then a divine game of charades and God was not truly with us any more than you are in a mirror you look at. The wind and smoke which is all that Pascal's cynic calls our soul is exactly what we met in the Incarnate Word.

Then as now, that stance is intolerable. What we have received in our creation is what we bring to God. What makes us what we are, our body and soul, and all the grief and joy we ourselves discover and create with them, this is what we offer back to God. You cannot call it love if God's response is to reject what God has made and God's goal is to turn us into what we are not: disembodied spirits, free to hate our flesh, eager to escape it in death. But God prized and sanctified human life by becoming one of us.

Thomas, the hidden hero of the Gospel, gets the point. He says, "No; you may believe on the basis of what you have seen and heard only, but unless I can *handle the body*, I won't believe. I won't believe that this apparition is Jesus returned, unless I can place my hand in his wounds, because the Incarnation I affirm is not a vague inspiration, not a spiritual sensation, not an enthusiastic illusion, but God's entry into flesh and blood, just as I am flesh and blood." Jesus gives Thomas what Thomas wants, because Thomas is right to demand it. His rebuke of him is actually an announcement of a new moment in history. Jesus will no longer be with his disciples; all now is fulfilled. From now on, while affirming the embodied Christ, they, and we who follow them, will no longer have physical contact with that Body, except through the bread and wine of the Eucharist and

through those sitting next to us, our brother and sister that we can see and hear and whose flesh and blood we can embrace and care for and serve.

Thomas is our guide into the fullness of faith. Thomas knew he believed in the actual person of Jesus, the person he had followed and loved, eaten with and talked to. Unless that were restored to him, he could not affirm Resurrection—and rightly so! But what about us? What do we need to handle so that we can fall down and say “My Lord and my God”?

God forbid you should say, as Pascal’s sophisticates did, “Oh, I really need to know nothing more than myself. I am content to roll incidentally through my days—a life with no implications and no impact. I am too inconsequential to damn. Surely God is too kind to take me any more seriously than I take myself.” God forbid you should say that—though Pascal knew that some do. You would not be here if you thought that. If this is not about anything, then none of us should be here.

But God forbid also that any of us should hear the Resurrection announced and respond with a bland smile. What else could Thomas have said? “Oh, I’m glad to hear that Jesus is risen. What a relief! I’ll take your word for it”? What else could he have said but “unless I experience that, I cannot believe what you say”? Thank God we do not believe simply because someone says something. Don’t believe me now. Look into your life and heart for why you are here.

God is not yet ours if we have not handled God’s power. The flesh in which you have every right to demand your evidence of Resurrection is your own. You as a Christian have more than the right to say to God that you want to place your hands in *your own* wounds, that seem to be to the death, that you walk around with daily, and that you want to feel in them, not corruption, but Life restored and sustained, *your* life restored and sustained.

Your Christian obligation is to probe the scars in Scripture deeply and to feel in them, not only the toughened tissues of flawed human communities, but the miracle of the one shared life that knit those torn fibers together. Your Christian duty is to know why, throughout history, the faith we seem at times to affirm at half mast with half a mind, has cost some people, even Jesus, their life. How were they so sure it was worth even their death to them, when we are so unsure what it is worth to us? Surely that is a question to ponder—not “were they crazy?”, but “am I missing something?”

Follow Thomas’ example and call for the experiences that are to be the foundation of your faith. Your Christian joy is to account for everything you can with the God-like reason God gave you, then to stare at what you *cannot* account for. From there, at the end of all those things that you can do without God, on the frontier of all those other things that you *cannot* do without God, call for the presence of the Risen One to be known to you, to be palpable in your life. At the boundary of what you cannot understand and cannot do without God, build your belief. Where you find your doubts, that is where you will find your faith. Demand to handle in your daily habits the difference God makes. Ask to be shown in your life what you could not have done without the power of God. Then, having seen, trust it will hold.

Pascal will have the last word—his little Wager. God either exists or does not. If God does not exist, then it does not matter whether you do or do not believe, because that does not change the outcome; if God does not exist, you pass into nothingness at death. But, if God does exist, then whether you believe or do not believe *does* matter and matters eternally. So believe.

This, however, is only your initial and shrewd calculation of the odds. Every gambler knows that, once you’ve decided the odds are worth the risk, you have to put something on the table. For Pascal, the bet you place is your

life. The dice are already rolling because you are already breathing. Your life is at stake, and it is already on the table. Your life is what you wager. Pascal says, you bet on the reality of God by behaving as if you already believed: pray, study Scripture, act with compassion and for justice, join others in worship—then watch for the fruit in your life. That will show you if your wager is sound.

Pascal mocks an imagined protest that such behavior will make us seem simple and docile and naive. “What have you to lose?” he writes. “What harm will come to you from choosing this course? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a sincere and true friend. . . . I tell you” he says, “that you will gain even in this life, and that at every step you take along this road you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite, for which you paid nothing.”

The Pascal concludes: “If my words please you and seem cogent, you must know that they come from a man who went down upon his knees before and after [writing this] to pray this infinite and indivisible Being, to whom he submits his own [being], that he might bring your being also to submit to God for your own good and for God’s glory, that strength might thus be reconciled with lowliness.”

May God stimulate our desire for evidence of our faith in our life until we also know in ourselves, in our flesh and blood, in our length of days, enough to cry out with Thomas, “My Lord and my God,” and to give praise to the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, as we do now, and as we hope to do for all eternity. AMEN.