

OK, here's your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter Joke.

So this was posted by a troubled parent: "This morning my son said his ear hurt and I said on the inside or outside. So he walked out the front door, came back in and said 'both.' It's moments like this that make me wonder if I'm saving too much for college."

And here's an Easter revelation. Brain cells die, skin cells die, even hair cells die. But FAT CELLS – must have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior because they seem to have eternal life.

OK, down to business. Your homiletic torture. In 3 points of course. First, the first 4 stanzas of John Updike's poem "Seven Stanzas at Easter" (1960).

Make no mistake: if He rose at all/ it was as His body;/ if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules/
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,/ the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,/ each soft Spring recurrent;/ it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled/ eyes
of the eleven apostles;/ it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,/ the same valved heart/ that—pierced – died, withered, paused, and then/
regathered out of enduring Might/ new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor;/ analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;/ making of the event a parable, a
sign painted in the/ faded credulity of earlier ages: / let us walk through the door.

Some have accused Updike of being too literal here, too simple. Nevertheless, he makes his point abundantly clear. Without the resurrection, the real and authentic rising of Jesus from the dead, our faith is in vain. This was the point made by John the Evangelist in his story of doubting Thomas, who doubted others' claims that Jesus was alive, demanded physical proof before he would accept a risen Lord. "Unless I see... unless I put my finger...unless I put my hand....I will not believe." Yet, a week later, when Jesus called him by name and invited him to touch and believe through empirical proof, we are not told whether Thomas touched him. We are only told that he saw and believed. Then with an acknowledgment of all future generations of believers who would not see but would believe, the risen Jesus pronounced us 'blessed.' (Patricia Sanchez, PREACHING RESOURCES, April 3, 2016, CELEBRATION PUBLICATIONS, p. 1-2)

This Thomas story is so important because it speaks of the struggle to believe which all of us deal with from time to time. So the rest of this homily is adapted from a lecture by Doris Betts, an author and English professor, which I have had filed away since 1982. I think she speaks well for all of us, each one a Thomas in our struggles with faith. She writes:

I am here not as one of those for whom faith has been easy, nor ecstatic; not as one who knows faith through a Damascus experience, but as one who has had to work at it, who will probably always have to work at it.

I belong to the tribe of the Apostle Thomas -- a natural doubter, always wishing I could have touched the wound myself, could have done the definitive study to prove the Shroud of Turin. I was the child in Sunday School who kept bringing up Cain's and Abel's wives instead of memorizing my Bible verse as I was supposed to. I argued with the catechism. I was the teenage rebel who asked the pastor questions about

scripture and had them answered by quotations from scripture; and even then I knew by instinct if not by terminology what a Circular Argument was.

So when at 18 I went away to college, I was not only ripe to lose my inherited, habitual Christianity – I was dying to get rid of its weight and mental encumbrance. At that time, I thought I saw clearly what some of Flannery O'Connor's self-righteous women see – I saw that Jesus Christ appealed to the losers, the weak, the dumb of this world, but not to Miss Pharisee of the present day. Did I lose my faith at college? Lose it? I threw it; I flung it away; I got rid of it gladly. I got rid of it, for instance, into 2 main wastebins: the small one marked Cultural Anthropology, and the large dumpster called Intellectual Pride.

Years later, reading a story by John Updike called PIGEON FEATHERS, I learned how he flung away much of his Dutch Reformed heritage after reading the same book that did me in, A TREATISE ON THE GODS by H. L. Mencken, which made clear that all our dying and rising gods were natural bogeymen of the human psyche. I didn't want to be a superstitious primitive, not a bright young intellectual like me!

And that was part of the second dumpster into which the faith went – Intellectual Pride.

It did seem to me then, and may at first glance seem sometimes to you, that on your campus the 'wimps' are the Christians, the homely ones with bad taste and nothing much to sleep off on Sunday mornings. It may seem to you that the action is not only with the cultural anthropologists but with the beauty queens and Phi Betas, with the French existentialists, the ethical humanists, with the novelty-religions based on herbal tea and meditation from the third vertebra cluster. Furthermore, I was shocked to meet on my campus thoroughly pleasant atheists, who were concealing their spiritual despair very nicely, thank you, and meantime were rearing their children and giving to the blood mobile just like normal, responsible people.

And so I flung away faith and chose intellect, believing it a forced either/or choice.

The story of how hard it is for any rich man to pass through the eye of the needle makes more sense to me with time. To be rich in money, or in beauty, or in brains, means always to risk losing sight of Whose gifts these are, and to replace gratitude FOR intellect with pride IN intellect. I wasn't all that rich in brains, but I thought I was, and I thought I had generated that good sense by spontaneous combustion.

But whether we have 5 or 10 talents' worth, intellect is God's gift. To worship it instead of the giver is an idolatry. But to use the human mind to see beyond to that infinite Mind and to the love which moves the sun and moon and the stars, that is an act of faith which frees the intellect to higher achievement, once it knows its source and purpose.

What changed me is a long private story; I will only say that it took many years, that it was no sudden mountaintop experience, that it came to climax at a helpless moment when my intellect alone had tried everything and given up.

Do you know the story of the solitary mountain climber whose anchors broke out and left him swinging by a rope alone over a chasm thousands of feet straight down? He tried everything; as a last resort he shouted and screamed his prayers for God to save him. From overhead a voice suddenly answered him: "This is God; I have heard you, my son, and will save you; just let go of the rope." The climber hung in astonished shock and silence, listening to that commanding echo. Again the voice came from above: "This is God; trust me that your prayer has been heard – just let go of the rope." Finally the climber yelled, "Is anybody else up there?"

For me, nobody else was up there; and I let go of the rope. Thus I came back to faith and to the Church not from fear and guilt – though that is one way – but in thanksgiving, because my prayers (like the climber’s) got answered. Listen, at that time I hadn’t even settled the question of God’s existence yet; much less the Cross of Christ. He answered my prayer before I had made up my mind about Thomas Aquinas’ 5 proofs. One April I read C.S. Lewis’ MERE CHRISTIANITY, and it made no logical sense to me; in May I read it again and I couldn’t understand what my problem had been.

The point is that I did not come back by the intellect. Intellect alone was not what I was using when I first fell in love, either, nor when I first saw my newborn child. Though it is an essential second half of faith, the intellect came second, dotting i’s and crossing t’s. To acquire faith does not mean that the intellect has been instantly satisfied; it may skulk along behind like a starved dog for a long time saying “But how about X? How about Y?” for those of us who belong to the tribe of St. Thomas.

That’s all right. God loves us, too. But the intellect didn’t have to lower its I.Q. and turn stupid either. It just had a larger view of the universe to work with, and a larger meaning for even THIS small life within it.

To others who may belong to the doubting tribe of St. Thomas, who may have trouble with mountain-top experiences, who may envy those born-again people who seem by lucky faith to have entered a revolving door as one person and spun out as another, to those I speak. Remember that the quick-change artist is not the only kind of person God is interested in.

He loves us slow-change artists too. On days when I envy those for whom faith seems like a winning sweepstake ticket, it helps me to check over everything else in my life which is the most important, and to accept the fact that I’m just not a blaze-of-life type. I have to work at things: study, worry, doubt, discover, rediscover. Love is important to me, and though it first entered my life like magic, it isn’t magic that has kept us married for 30 years. We’ve had to work at it. Or how about my work as a writer? Surely people have an innate talent for writing? No, I work harder now at my prose than when I was a beginner.

In Christianity, too, my faith is always calling on my intellect, asking questions, sometimes learning answers. I have to work at faith, practice it, go to church, study, and pray. Some days my belief weakens until I have to struggle just to go through the motions of Christ’s example even though His figure has grown dim to me. But, ah, on other mornings, I wake up and the world is a Garden of Eden, with everything beautifully in place, and every leaf lit up with the light of God’s grace.

A writer named Madeline L’Engle, a life-time Anglican, has been a comfort to me. “Sometimes,” she writes, “I know I am going to come down with an attack of atheism again just as if it were the flu, and I just get ready to endure 3 or 4 days of spiritual aches and pains before I’m well again.”

Some of you have found faith as easy and natural as breathing in and out. Some of us are like people with allergies: physics can ruin us for a while; biological determinism will give us a bad weekend; TV preachers embarrass us; and we have a chronic case of despairing over evil, undeserved pain, and the suffering of the world’s children.

God gave to the tribe of Thomas that worrisome, sensitive, aggravating, questioning and doubting intellect; at its best, it is part of His Image. And to us, too, sometime when we are hanging by a slender thread over the chasm of what we cannot solve and do not understand, to us in our helplessness the Good News of God’s love in Christ comes down and speaks to the strongest, most intricate, more prideful intellect.

The amazing thing is that for everyone, of whatever I.Q., whatever gift, whatever income or sex or class or race or station, for ALL of us – there is a moment when God offers us His love one more time.

At the moment when we accept that love with thanks, when we can let go of the rope, then – for the first time – we are really Free to Fly. Amen. (adapted from THE PHOENIX, October 18, 1982)

FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY