

For the Atheists Among Us Today

When I was child I would say to people, “I’ll bet you a dollar I can prove you’re not really here.” And people would say to me, “That’s ridiculous, kid, of course I’m here. You’re on.” So I would say, “Are you in New York?” and they would say, “No.” Then I would say, “Are you in Chicago?” and they would say, “No.” Then I would say, “If you’re not in New York or Chicago, you must be somewhere else, right?” and they would say, “Right, I’m somewhere else.” And then I would say, “Well, if you’re somewhere else, as you just said, then you can’t be here. Where’s my dollar?” I don’t think I ever collected on that bet.

In a similar way you could argue that no one actually has a birthday. There are 365 days in a year. The odds of your birthday being on any one specific day of the year then are 364 to 1. Those are some pretty long odds. No gambler, no statistician, no actuary, no stockbroker would take that bet. (We’ll maybe a stockbroker would these days.) But how can you prove beyond the shadow of a doubt you were born on a certain day?

You were too young to remember the event. We could ask your parents but they would be biased witnesses. You could present a birth certificate but documents can be forged. Even a video would not be compelling evidence these days; videos can be doctored using computers to look so authentic that even experts cannot tell the difference. We can only conclude then that there was no particular day on which you were born.

We can play games like that because words and numbers are not reality, they merely reflect reality and they reflect it imperfectly. Words and numbers can be manipulated to say just about anything, but that does not change what actually does and does not exist. Many things cannot be proven or disproved; they are matters of trust, they are matters of faith. Someone said, “Tell a man there are a billion stars in the sky and he will believe you, tell him there’s wet paint on a wall and he has to touch it for himself.” It’s funny what people will and will not accept on faith.

Today, Easter Sunday, the Resurrection of our Lord, is the Queen of Festivals for those of us of the Christian faith. It is the biggest celebration of the year for Christian believers. But undoubtedly among us today are some people who are not believers, or at least people who are struggling with their faith. Among us today are people who might describe themselves as agnostics or atheists. They are people who may not believe that God exists; or don’t believe that Jesus was born, died, and rose again; or don’t believe that God’s Holy Spirit is among us here and now.

First let me say that agnostics and atheists and seekers of all sorts are most welcome here. You are among friends. If Christians were to be honest, each and every one of us would have to confess that there have been times that we have not only questioned God’s goodness, there have been times that we have doubted God’s very existence. We’ve come to a different conclusion about God than you atheists, but we respect your journey, which we know is often a wrestling and a struggle.

We appreciate your honesty and the integrity of your inquiry. We're not here to beat up on you while you're a captive audience. That wouldn't be fair and we want to be fair. But we simply have to witness and testify to what we believe and know to be true because if we didn't that would be inhospitable, we would be doing you a disservice. We believe the Christian faith is the very best gift we have to give you, and if we don't offer it to you we would be withholding from you what could possibly turn out to be the most important thing in your life. Knowing God exists and believing in Christ's resurrection can bring your life more peace, more joy, and more meaning to your life than you could possibly imagine.

And for those of you, who are safe and secure in your faith, listen in today also, because there's good stuff in here for you too. Such as this: God is like a dog whistle. Dogs can hear higher pitched sound frequencies than humans, so when you blow a dog whistle, dogs can hear it but people can't. Does the fact that you can't hear the whistle mean it doesn't exist? Of course not. There are all kinds of things that really, truly exist that we cannot hear or touch or taste or see or smell, but they are there.

The fact that you do not perceive God in your life, the fact that Christ's resurrection doesn't move you, doesn't necessarily mean that God doesn't exist or that Christ didn't rise from the grave. It just may mean that you are not attuned to spiritual realities. It just may mean that you haven't learned to perceive the subtleties of faith yet. To me all white paint looks the same, white. But to the architect who designed our renovations there are differences between true white, off white, eggshell, cream, arctic ice, and so on. To one person a sunrise is just a sunrise and a flower is just a flower.

To another they are expressions of God's wisdom, majesty, and power. It's all a matter of perception.

Someone might say, "It's obvious God does not exist. Why would a good God let innocent people suffer? He wouldn't, so God must not be real." As a Christian I would have to agree with you. Looking at the world, it is obvious that God does not exist, just as it is obvious that the world is flat, that the sun revolves around the earth, and that this pulpit is solid. All those things are obvious, but incorrect. Over time, as humanity progressed, or should we say that as God shared His wisdom with a maturing humanity, people came to realize and find ways to observe that the earth is round and that it revolves around the sun, and that the pulpit is made of atoms where the electrons orbit the nucleus in ellipses that have, relative to their size, even greater distances between them than the distances between the earth and sun. What appears obvious may actually be false.

How then do we prove that God exists and that Jesus is His crucified and risen Son? Unfortunately, I don't have videotape. Of course, as we said, that could be doctored anyway. There is no proof of our faith that will convince everyone every time. Faith is a gift, a gift that the Holy Spirit works in whom and when he will, but we pray that His gift of faith will come to you. Perhaps these words of mine might help facilitate that process.

God can be known, in part at least, through His creation. The universe is not God, but the cosmos bears the stamp of its creator. Modern science tells us that the universe had a beginning and will have an end. The universe just wasn't "always was" as some people say. But how did that beginning

happen? Where did atoms and subatomic particles come from? That's awful hard to explain without some reference to some kind of higher power. To say the universe just sprang up out of nothing seems to me to take more of a blind leap of faith than to profess belief in God. There's the story of a great scientist who challenged God to a contest to see who could make a better universe. God went first, took some dust, and made the world as we know it. The scientist said, "Give me some dust and I'll make a better world." And the Lord said, "Go get your own dust."

If you will concede that there is a God, then it only makes sense that God would want to communicate with his creation, especially human beings, the crown of creation, that he created for loving communion with himself. Have you ever watched a movie or played a computer simulation game and found yourself really moved by or concerned about the characters, as if they were real? How much more so does God care about us, beings made in His own image.

If God were going to do that, communicate with us, he'd have to pick a particular time and place. Christians say God revealed himself in Christ in Israel 2000 years ago. Why Palestine in the first century A.D.? Why not Palestine in the first century A.D? It had to happen sometime and somewhere, why not there? Perhaps God had reasons for choosing "such a backward time and such a strange land" that we don't know.

Some people used to claim that Jesus never lived at all, that he was just a myth, like Hercules. Archeologists and scholars today say that we have more evidence pointing to an actual historical Jesus than we do for people

like King Arthur or Julius Caesar. But to say there was no Jesus of Nazareth and to say that Jesus of Nazareth was not God's Son are two different things. What proof do we have that Jesus rose from the grave? If God really is a great God, to do anything less than defeat death would be grossly underachieving. If God really cares about his people, to do anything less than save them from their worst enemy, death, would call His love into question.

There were eyewitnesses who saw the resurrected Christ, and ate and drank with him. Of course those witnesses are dead now. The testimony of those witnesses was written down, we have it in the Bible. But, of course, not everyone recognizes the Bible as inspired Holy Writ as we do. It's easy to see why the skeptics are skeptical. But how does one explain that in a time and place that produced "Messiahs by the sack full" only one is said to have been raised from the tomb, only one is remembered today? If Jesus' resurrection was faked, why did those who supposedly conspired with him and claimed to have seen him alive go happily to the gruesome deaths of martyrs if they knew Jesus was in fact dead? The only explanation is that they knew him to be beyond the shadow of a doubt alive. He is risen. **He is risen indeed.**

I admit it; it is not easy to believe in Jesus. It's harder to believe than not to. It's easy to understand why some people won't make the effort. Believers sometimes envy non-believers. They imagine it would be nice to live without all the commitments faith brings, without moral absolutes, without the constant temptations to disbelief. There is much peer pressure on people

today, especially young people, not to believe. Faith doesn't win us many earthly rewards like popularity or wealth.

But for those who know in their hearts that Jesus lives, there's just no ignoring it. For those who have experienced his love and grace, you've just got to share that with everybody. I hope, and I trust, that God will get that resurrection faith into everyone's life somehow, sometime, somewhere. I pray that all the believers here today will go home affirmed and strengthened in their faith. And I especially pray that the agnostics and skeptics, and those wrestling with their faith or lack thereof, will have their hearts and minds opened to God's Word, his Word of truth and beauty, the Word of life abundant and eternal, the word which is Jesus Christ, crucified and risen. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.