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## Faith and Trust

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on

The Second Sunday of Easter, May 1, 2011

Martin Luther once said, “That upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.” Luther was talking about what it means to have a god. He says, “A god means that from which we expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe in Him from the heart . . . that upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god.”<sup>1</sup>

Here Luther provides a classic description of faith as trust. For Luther faith is more than simply believing that something is true. It is being prepared to act on that belief and relying upon it. It is about setting our hearts upon something, about putting our trust in someone. It is about that something or someone from which, when we are really honest, we expect all goodness to come and to which we would turn when times got really tough. To make his point Luther contrasts faith with historical knowledge. Luther says to believe in the historical reliability of the gospels is not saving faith. In his provocative way, Luther says sinners and demons are perfectly capable of that. Rather, true faith or saving faith, for Luther, is the trust or the faith that Christ died *for me* and that Christ rose again *for me*, that Christ has accomplished his work *for us and for our salvation*. There is a difference between believing that certain things about God or Christ are true, and having faith that those things about God and Christ are true for me, true for us. One type is abstract and general; knowing it barely affects our lives. The other is specific and personal; knowing it changes everything.

To get at what Luther means, we might think of the first type of belief as being like our beliefs that it is currently 88 degrees in Hawaii, that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, and that the Gold Finch is the New Jersey State Bird. All these things may very well be true. But my belief in their truth will hardly affect my life. Faith in God, according to Luther, is different, or at least, should be. If my response to belief in God is roughly similar to my response to belief that the Gold Finch is the state bird of New Jersey, then either my belief in God lacks genuine trust or my belief in Gold Finches is quite extraordinary. Faith is not merely believing that

<sup>1</sup> See Martin Luther's *Large Catechism*.

certain things are true, but rather trusting that certain things about God are true for us personally and being willing to respond to those things with our whole hearts, with our whole lives.

To use another example, when I say something like “I have faith in my brother,” I am not saying that I believe he is six foot two inches, has wavy black hair, and brown eyes ... all of which are true. Rather, what I mean when I say “I have faith in my brother” is that I can count on him when I need him, that I can pick up the phone and he will be there for me, that if times get tough, I know he will be there for me. I wouldn’t push this analogy too far, but you get the point. For Luther, faith in God is not primarily about believing that certain about God things are true in some general or abstract sense, but rather trusting that God is faithful, loyal, and trustworthy, that God has acted to save me, that Christ is Christ for me, for us.

Our Gospel lesson is the story of Doubting Thomas. Many of us are familiar with the story. We hear it every year on the Second Sunday of Easter. In the evening of that first Easter Day, the risen Lord appeared to his disciples, but Thomas was not with them. When the other disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord, Thomas says, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later the risen Lord appears to his disciples again, but this time Thomas is with them. Jesus tells him to see his hands and to touch his side. And Thomas responds by saying, “My Lord and my God.”

Now there is a lot to be said about this passage, more than I can possibly say in a single sermon. You have probably heard many sermons on Doubting Thomas, on the relationship between faith and doubt, and evidence and belief. And these are important topics, and they were, no doubt, very good sermons. But what I want to focus on this morning is not simply the belief of Thomas, but rather the trust and confidence we find in his statement “My Lord and my God.” Part of the reason I want to do this is because the Greek word translated as “to believe” in this passage, *pisteuo*, actually means trust and confidence much more than our English word “believe” conveys. But it also strikes me that Thomas’ confession of faith is notably formulated not in a general statement like “It is the Lord,” but rather in personal language, in the declaration “My Lord and my God.” There is no doubt an element of belief in this statement, but it also seems to be much more than that. It is also about personal trust and faith in the risen Christ as “my Lord and my God.” It seems like Luther’s notion of faith as trust, as that upon which we set our heart, is more to the point here. This is not just an abstract statement about the crucified and risen Christ, but about Thomas’ faith that the crucified and risen Lord is there *for him and for his salvation*.

And it seems to me this type of faith makes all the difference, because it is basically the good news of Easter becoming real in the heart of Thomas. That Thomas believes means that he has confidence and trust that the promises of God are true, are trustworthy, and not just in some general and abstract way, but personally, for him. *His* Lord and *his* God has been raised from the dead, and that means everything has changed. Cruelty is not the last word. Death does not get the final laugh. Sin and death and evil are not the ultimate powers of the universe. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Forgiveness and love and life are the final realities of the universe. We need no longer be afraid. The power of God is stronger than any tomb. God has conquered the future and promised us a share in the eternal life of Christ. We can lead our lives with courage and with confidence because the Lord of all life is on our side.

When Thomas sees the risen Christ he says, “My Lord and my God.” It seems to me that this more than simply a matter of historical knowledge. Rather, it is about the transformation of Thomas’ whole life, because in the risen Christ, in his wounds, he sees his Lord and his God, who is there for him and for his salvation. It seems to me that the most important part of the story is not that Thomas put his hands in the nail marks or in the side of Christ, but rather that he put his trust in, his heart in his Lord and God.

In a few minutes we will baptize new members of the Church, and I don’t know of a more personal and intimate way in which we can express our faith and our trust in our Lord and in our God. In baptism we are saying that the promises of God are trustworthy, are true, for all those who have been baptized into the death and resurrection of our Lord. In the service the celebrant will say, in baptism “we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.” This is not an abstract statement of belief, but a trust and confidence that in baptism we united with Christ in his death and resurrection, are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ’s own forever.

Stanley Hauerwas, once named the best theologian in America and now a member of the Episcopal Church, says this about why he cries at baptisms: “My tears are unexpected even though I often cry in church. I usually cry at baptisms at Holy Family ... I am not sure why I cry at such times. You would think I would be used to it by now. I have spent my whole life in church. Thank God, however, that I have never gotten used to being a Christian. I think that is why I cry. I simply cannot get over what a surprising and wonderful life God has given me.”<sup>2</sup>

Faith is not simply believing certain things to be true. It is a matter of the heart, a matter of trust in the God from whom all good things come, the God who created us and redeemed us.

In a few moments, we will also be invited to renew our own baptismal covenants. We will be asked, “Do you believe in God the Father?” and will answer “I believe in God the Father.” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God?” and answer “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord.” “Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit?” and answer “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” As we say these words, I wonder if it might be helpful to think that, at least, part of what we mean when we say “I believe in God” is “I trust in God,” or “I set my heart in the Lord.” I wonder if it might be helpful to think of the language of the creed as also the language of the heart, that it’s not just saying general and abstract things about God, but confessing our faith and trust in “our Lord and our God.” And as we prepare to say these words together, I cannot help but think of the last words of our Lord to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” As we join with those who are committing themselves to Christ in baptism, may we, people who have not seen like Thomas and yet have come to believe, indeed, be blessed.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child* (Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 279-80.