

The Real Deal
Hebrews 9:24-28

I was talking with someone who had visited the Louvre, that great museum in France. They were looking at the great works of art. Suddenly she found herself in front of the Mona Lisa. THE MONA LISA! She stood there aghast, standing in the presence of such greatness. As she was standing there overwhelmed, trying to regain her equilibrium, a museum guard walked over to her and whispered, "It's not real, you know." At first she didn't understand what he meant. How was it not real? She was looking at it. If not for the rope which cordoned her off, she could have touched it. Certainly it was real.

Then the guard went on to explain. The original Mona Lisa was far too frail to be put on public display. This was a very good counterfeit of the Mona Lisa. Yes, it was a real painting. But it was a copy of the real Mona Lisa, placed there so that people who could not see the painting done by Leonardo da Vinci could still have an idea of the beauty of the original Mona Lisa.

The guard made a mistake when he said that the copy wasn't real. Of course it was real. What he should have said is that it wasn't the real deal. Copies are not as real as the originals. That's a distinction that we need to make.

Many discussions are off the mark because they talk about what is real and what is not real, when they should be talking about what is real and what is more real. Some things are more real than others. Originals are more real than copies. Those who create things are more real than the things they create. Permanent things are more real than temporary things.

The debates between non-religious people and religious people get confused because they don't make those distinctions. The secularists say that this world is real and the spiritual world is not real. Some religious people say that the spiritual world is real and this world isn't. They are both wrong. The spiritual world is real. Human beings have always known that. Throughout history and throughout the world the vast majority of people have known that spiritual things are real. We know that because we are physical creatures and spiritual creatures. As I said a couple of weeks ago, we are like amphibians, at home in two different worlds. The only way for a human being to deny the reality of spiritual realities is to ignore what he knows in his heart of hearts. That's like someone closing his eyes and saying to the person before him, "You're not real, because I can't see you."

On the other hand, the people who say that only spiritual things are real and that this world is not real are equally wrong. There are religious people who are so focused on heavenly things that they think of this world and our lives in this world as so unimportant. Every now and then you hear somebody say something like, "Why should we worry about taking care of the earth? It will end soon anyway." That's a lot like somebody saying, "Someday we will move out of this house, so let's start tearing out the plumbing and wiring and sell them for scrap metal."

Revelation tells us that Christ will rule this world for a thousand years. I interpret that to mean that someday the work Christ came to do, and the gospels clearly tell us that Christ came to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth, will be completed. His coming marked the beginning of the final phase of the work God began at the creation of the world. Christ is

working through those who are led by his Spirit to continue that mission. Someday God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The nations will live together in love, peace and harmony among ourselves and with creation, as God intended and as Christ taught us through his words and through his life. Someday that will become a reality. And the age of Christ will last for a very long time before this creation comes to an end and God creates the new heavens and the new earth. And I wouldn't be surprised if, when God creates the new earth, God will model it after what we have built here on this earth. I kind of think God will take what we have done and perfect it. If so, we are putting together the blueprint for our eternal home.

To those folks who say this world and this life aren't important because they will end soon, we have to say, "Wrong! They do matter. We are building something very important in this world. What we do with our lives in this world has eternal significance, as we are learning how to live in eternity."

This world is real. But the spiritual world is more real. The Creator is more real than the creation. The eternal is more real than the temporal. And the original is more real than the copy.

Keep in mind that the Book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians. The first Christians were both Jewish and Christian. They struggled with bringing together these two religions. One of the things Jews were taught was that worship must be done in the Temple in Jerusalem. Worship must be conducted by Temple priest. Sacrifices must be offered on the altar in the Temple. Worship done in any other place was blasphemy. The Jewish Christians struggled with that.

Hebrews reminded them that there is something more real than the Temple in Jerusalem. That Temple was certainly real. It was an impressive building made out of the finest stones, metals and cloths. But it was only a copy of the Heavenly Temple, where God truly abides.

The writer of Hebrews was like that guard at the Louvre. To those who were awed by the beauty and majesty of the Temple and the sacrifices offered by the priests, the writer of Hebrews whispers, "It's not the real deal, you know."

As we worship here, this sanctuary is intended to make us feel as if we were in a heavenly place. This altar is intended to remind us of the presence of God. The cross is intended to remind us of Christ's sacrifice for our salvation. Are they real? Certainly they are real. We can see them. We can touch them.

But this sanctuary is not really heaven. This altar is not God. This cross is not the cross upon which Christ died. These things are signs of the real thing. They are here to remind us that heaven is real. God is real. Christ really did offer up his body and blood as a sacrifice for our sins.

The purpose of coming together in the sanctuary is to lift our eyes and our hearts into heaven. The Irish talk about thin places. They say that there is a barrier between heaven and earth. But there are those places where the barrier is so thin that you can almost reach into heaven. When we come together in the sanctuary on Sunday morning, we are trying to create a thin place. We are creating a copy of that which is real in order to remind ourselves that the real deal does exist.

Life is real. Our joys and our sorrows are real. The people we live with and work with and bump into each day are real people. This world we live in is real. The consequences of the decisions we make and the life we live are real. Some people will say that because this world and this life are temporary, they don't really matter.

This world is real, and this life is important. But there are things more real and more important than this life and more real than this world. God is more real than us. Heaven is more

real than this world. And the sacrifice Christ placed on the heavenly altar for us is more real than our sins and more real than our own efforts to atone for our sins.

We need to remind ourselves of that. It's so easy to get caught up in living in this world that we forget that there is something far more real than all this. Christ said, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End." Before all this was created, Christ was worshipping his Father in the Eternal Sanctuary. When all this is gone, our Creator will be leading us in worshipping his Father in the Heavenly Temple. So, which is more real—this created world or the dwelling place of the Creator? The Creator is more real than creation. The original is more real than the copy. That which is eternal is more real than that which is temporary.

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