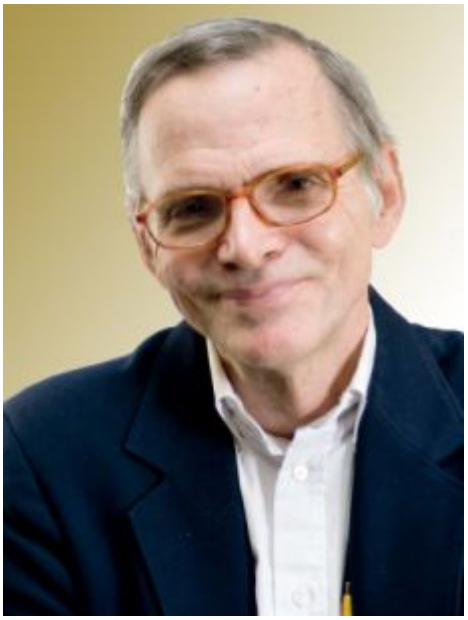
Written by **Jack Kenny** on April 6, 2012

Easter Message: On Avoiding — and Evading — the Obvious



Ted Williams, baseball's last .400 hitter, labored passionately, but often in vain, to impart his unique knowledge of the science of hitting to those less knowledgeable of the subject — which included, broadly speaking, the whole human race. He would often grow frustrated with young players who would learn from no teacher but the harshest, the one called Experience. "By the time you hitters figure out what to do," Williams thundered at the Washington Senators when he managed that uninspiring assemblage of lesser mortals, "you're too old to do it!" Time, it is said, is the best teacher, but it kills all its pupils.

Yet we live and learn and hope, even when the reason for our hope is a good deal less than obvious. Scripture tells us that Christ conquered sin and death, the late theologian F.J. Sheed reminded readers in a little gem of a book, *Christ in Eclipse* (1978) "But we know that we shall die (and) sin shows no sign of losing its grip."

Sin and death have been the constants of human life from the beginning. (Taxes came not long after.) Yet while we can neither deny death nor long avoid taxes, sin seems somehow easy to forget in a culture that has replaced right and wrong and true and false with more vaguely comfortable categories, like "old-fashioned" or "up to date," "progressive" or "reactionary," "popular" or "out of favor." We are never far from the kingdom of pollsters and focus groups.

We don't think very much about sin these days, or often hear about it, even in church. And while we can't deny the certainty of death, we do find ways to ignore it for as long as possible. Even when we get down to the unpleasant business of making out a will, choosing a mortician and making funeral arrangements, chances are we give little thought to where we will spend eternity. And as Matthew Brady says in the play *Inherit the Wind*, "I do not think about the things I do not think about."

We live in an age that emphasizes feeling more than thought, and many of us — I would dare say most or nearly all of us, though it would be difficult, if not impossible, to get a statistical measure — have a half-acknowledged feeling of unease and dissatisfaction, a sense that we are not what we ought to be. So we think — no, we imagine — excuses for the way we are: an overbearing, guilt-inducing mother, an alcoholic father, an overly critical school teacher or an insensitive camp counselor created in our impressionable youth the complexes and neuroses that have warped our otherwise lovely personalities. Or we may be in even further denial, having convinced ourselves that we are just fine the way we are and believing, whatever our formal religion, that our relationship with the Almighty is, as described in a bestseller of a few decades ago, a reassuring *I'm Okay, You're Okay*, easygoing affair that leaves us with nothing to fear but a downturn in the stock market, an Arab oil embargo, or some other material threat to our vaunted standard of living.

We have found many ways to drown our fears as well as our sorrows. Television and sporting events fill our minds with amusements. Consciousness of our insecurities may send us running to the liquor cabinet or the psychiatrist's couch. We value religion, if at all, as a solace, a balm, a benign assurance that "everything will be all right" in the end and "Everybody's gonna have a wonderful time up there." There is, however, a dark alternative to that happy ending, however reluctant our modern preachers may be to warn us of it. Saint Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, wrote in his *Rule*: "Live in fear of judgment day and have a great horror of hell." That's not the kind of positive, uplifting message we are accustomed to hearing. It strikes us as excessively dark and foreboding. As today's young people say: "Bummer, man."

The movie *Bull Durham* opens with a character named Annie Savoy proclaiming, "I believe in the church of baseball." She had tried all the other religions, she tells us: "I've worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan." She had even, believe it or not, experimented with Christianity, or, as she put it, "I gave Jesus a chance. But it just didn't work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me." It must have been a brief trial. For it appears that Annie Savoy, and countless others in real life, have rejected Christianity without ever grasping its central point.

Our guilt is not something the Lord or other "authority figures" laid on us. It is, for the most part, something we create for ourselves and carry about in our psyches, generally managing to leave it buried somewhere below the level of conscious thought. Psychiatrist Karl Menninger began his bestselling book of the 1970s, *Whatever Became of Sin?* with the true story of a stern-faced man who stood one noon hour on a busy street corner in Chicago. As pedestrians went by, he repeatedly extended his right arm, pointed an accusing finger at the nearest passerby and loudly proclaimed, "Guilty!" No doubt he gave many at least a moment of discomfort as they hurried past him. But at least one man paused long enough to ask in amazement, "But how did *he* know?"

We all carry guilt of one kind or another — or of several kinds simultaneously — whether we acknowledge it or not. The whole point of Christianity is that the Lord, who Annie Savoy thinks "laid too much guilt" on her, is the only One who can take it away. Saint Benedict told his monks to fear judgment and have a holy horror of hell, not because they — and we — are doomed anyway. In that case, it would make more sense to forget about it for as long as possible and merely "eat, drink and be merry." Rather it was because there is an alternative: We can yet live in faith for the One who bore our sins, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah: "We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way: But the Lord laid upon Him the guilt of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

Saint Paul tells us (I Corinthians 15:19) that if Christ is not risen from the dead, then we who have believed in Him are the most miserable of all creatures, for we are yet in our sins, with the specter of death looming mercilessly before us. Yet, as Sheed wrote, "many learned Christian teachers are denying the Resurrection, their happiness not noticeably affected: does Paul's word 'miserable' say anything at all to you and me?"

What, we might ask ourselves this Easter morning, is the source of either our happiness or our misery? Are we joyful and grateful for the Resurrection? Or do we believe, perhaps half-consciously, that we have no need of a Redeemer? Is that belief an expression of a defiant courage? ("I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.") Or merely an exercise in self-deception?

For many, the three days from Good Friday through Easter Sunday will be but another lost weekend. For others, they bring renewal and hope. The following prayer, found at the 14th station in the Stations

of the Cross ("Jesus is Laid in the Tomb"), tells why:

> Almighty and eternal God, on the edge of sadness when all seemed lost, You restored to us the Savior we thought defeated and conquered. Help us, we beg you, so to empty ourselves that we might see Your hand in every failure and Your victory in every defeat. These things we ask in the name of Your son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns forever with You in the unity of the Holy Spirit.
>
> Amen.