

The Living among the Dead

In the name of him who has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, dear friends in Christ: This may seem a strange question to ask on this the highest of the Church's high holy days, but I'm wondering how many of you know what YouTube is? I confess that I've only recently discovered it myself (or rather, to be more accurate, I had it pointed out to me). In any case, for those who are not familiar with it, YouTube is an internet web site on which people can post videos that they've made or video clips of other things like famous news clips from the past, or commercials, or cartoons, or movie trailers – it's all there. Whatever you've got on video (with the exception of stuff that would be X-rated), you can send it to YouTube and there it is for the whole world to watch. And people do watch and then they rate what they see on a scale of zero to five stars. So, the site serves as sort of a stage for any would be film maker or amateur actor or hopeful garage band to show what they got and maybe get noticed – and who knows? Maybe make it to the big time.

Well apparently, this has been going on for some time; so recently they held the first annual YouTube awards. Internet users from all over the world voted for what they thought were the best videos to date in several categories: best overall, most creative, funniest, and so on. And if by now you're wondering where I'm going with all this, here it is: I want to tell you about the video that won the award in the category "most adorable". It was a three- or four-minute cartoon that someone made and submitted that features a kiwi. No, I don't mean one of those fuzzy green fruits that when cut in half looks like what might be a mad scientist's attempt to crossbreed sea slugs and bananas (Thanks, Pastor, for that image. I'll never eat one of those again). Rather, I'm talking about that species of flightless birds from the land down under which is slightly smaller than a chicken and looks sort of like a pear with feet and a long, slender beak. I think maybe the Muppet character *Gonzo* is based on a kiwi.

So as this cartoon begins, you see this little kiwi bird pulling for all he's worth on a rope that he's holding in his beak. He's straining hard to pull something up the side of a cliff; but whatever it is, it's out of sight over the edge of the precipice. After a tremendous effort he manages to get the rope anchored to a tree. Once that's done, he slides down the rope a hundred feet or more to object he's been hauling up the side. At first you can't quite make out what it is; but then it becomes clear that it's another tree, and it's horizontal so that its root end is toward the cliff face, and the tree is sticking out at a 90° angle from the cliff. Got the picture? Okay, the kiwi then walks along the trunk to the tree's exposed spreading roots and begins to nail them with a hammer to the side of the cliff. When that's done, he shimmies back up the rope to the top of the cliff. And look, if you're thinking, "Wait a minute, Pastor, how does a four-pound bird haul a five ton tree up the side of a cliff? And how do a few nails hold that tree in place? And how in the world does a kiwi – a bird without any discernable wings – even hold a hammer and nails, much less use the hammer to drive them into the cliff?" if that's what you're thinking, you're missing the point. It's a *cartoon*: an *adorable* cartoon. Go with it, okay?

The whole point is that it's pulling you in and getting you to wonder, "What in the Sam Hill is he up to?" You soon find out. Now, back on top, the little kiwi peers over the edge of the precipice and suddenly you can see not one, but a whole forest of trees that he's nailed to the side of the cliff ... and it goes down, down, down so far that you cannot see where it ends. All you can see is this spreading landscape of hundreds of trees that seems to go on forever. You realize that this has been one very busy little bird. It's at this point that the little guy braces himself and jumps off the edge. So now he's falling headfirst just beyond the tops of all these trees he's nailed to the cliff. And the view changes so that you see things from his perspective – and then it dawns on you what it's all about: he's done all this work in order to create for himself the illusion of flying, because now here is, soaring above the trees like a real bird ... a bird with wings ... free at last of cruel dictates of nature that decreed he should be a silly bird that can't fly. He so hated the reality he was born into that he determined to change it. And through lots of hard work and ingenuity, he did. Now at last he's flying. He's achieved his dream. The video ends with him soaring into the clouds and disappearing up, up, and away! And you can't help but think, "Good for the little guy! That's the spirit!"

It really is an uplifting piece that says something about character and perseverance and creativity. It inspires us with its message of “You don’t like the world? Then change it.” It’s easy to see why it won the award for most adorable. It really is very cute and very well done. It almost makes you believe a kiwi could fly. But if you are thinking at all, sooner or later reality should hit home. The fact is that in that final scene when he appears to be flying up and away into the clouds what he’s really heading into is a bank of ground fog at the base of the cliff. What does this mean? It means that you can work all you want to change your perspective – you can redefine your reality in any way you choose to make it more agreeable to you – you can labor to change your world; but as Chief Engineer Scot of the Starship Enterprise used to say, “Captain, you canna defy the laws of physics.” Apparently, the heroic little kiwi bird never learned the cardinal law of skydiving that says: *No one ever got hurt falling from an airplane. It’s the sudden stop that does the damage.*

Now, since you’re probably still wondering where I’m going, the reason I mention all of this is that I think this little cartoon is a perfect illustration of a lot of modern mankind’s thinking. There are a lot of things about this world that people don’t like. We don’t like injustice, world hunger, poverty, crime, natural disasters, global warming ... we don’t like the unequal distribution of wealth in the world – although since it is unequal, we’d rather be where we are enjoying the high life than suffering in some grungy, crowded third world ghetto. We don’t like sickness. We don’t like getting old. *And most of all we don’t like death.* But that’s the world we were born into.

And rather than face reality the way it is, a lot of people – including each of us a lot of the time – would rather redefine reality than face it the way it is. You don’t like world poverty? Try not to think about it – or send a check that will for just 52 cents a day feed and clothe some starving child in Africa, so you can say you did your part. You don’t like crime? Then get yourself a good home security system so you don’t have to worry about it. You don’t like natural disasters? Then don’t buy a beach home in Florida or a condominium on the San Andreas Fault. Then slap your head in disgust when you watch the news on TV and see what happens to the stupid people who did. You don’t like getting old? Then work out, get a face lift and tummy tuck, stick to a diet of fruit and granola bars, and wear clothes made for teenagers. See how easy it is?

And nowhere is this approach more popular than with the issue of death. You can simply avoid the topic; that’s the easiest: pretend it’s not there. Or you can focus on the miracles of modern medicine. Why, people are living longer and healthier now than ever before; and one day soon we’ll be able cure most forms of cancer and heart disease. In the near future we may be able to extend our lives by several decades – and gosh, there’s even the promise of cryogenics by which it might be possible to freeze yourself now in the hope that one day they can revive you after they’ve figured out how to cure what’s killing you. Or you can go all the way and deny death. That’s what most modern thinkers do and they work awful hard to convince themselves of it. You see, it’s not death we’re heading for: it’s nothingness. It’s oblivion. It’s into the misty clouds of obscurity. There’s nothing beyond this life. So, what we’re doing now is living – and that’s all there is. So, we might as well make the most of it. Enjoy the ride now because when it’s over, it’s over.

This is nothing more than the kiwi bird’s philosophy. If I turn my perspective of reality on its end, then there’s nothing ahead but puffy white clouds to sail into. The trouble is that that perspective does not correspond to the truth. We’re not we’re flying off into oblivion; we are all hurtling toward an appointment with death. The cold jagged stones at the base of the cliff are coming closer to all of us at terminal velocity – it’s just that some of us have a bit farther to fall than others before we get there. Just as you cannot defy the laws of physics, you cannot defy the Law of God – and of chief importance for our discussion today, the Law that says the soul that sins will die. The perspective that says “what we’re doing now is living” is wrong. It’s a self-delusion. No, since we have all taken the plunge into sin, what we’re doing now is *dying*. And after death comes the judgment. That’s our reality. The question is: now that you’ve come to see things as they truly are, what are you going to do about it?

The best answer I’ve ever heard is given in today’s Scripture readings. There we read that in Adam all die. That means that every one of Adam’s descendants is destined for the grave, and that includes all of us. There’s no escaping it. But in the same passage we also read that all who are in Christ will be made alive. We know because Christ has been raised from the dead and he is the first fruits of those who have

fallen asleep. That means as sure as he is risen, we too who live by faith in him will also rise from the dead. Now, someone may say, "You're just playing word games. You're simply redefining reality to be like you want it to be – so you're doing the same thing as the kiwi bird; it's just that you have a different spin on it." Not so. You see, you and I can only use words to describe reality. We can say which way is up and which way is down for instance – whether accurately or not; but our words do not make it so. If I say that way [pointing left] is up and that way [pointing down] is horizontal, I haven't changed anything. A plumb line will prove me wrong.

But with Jesus things are different. What he says is true because he is the Truth. And when he speaks reality conforms to be what he says. That's because he is the powerful and Living Word of God. He is the Word by which all creation came into being. He is the Word by which the foundations of the earth were laid. God spoke, and it happened. Things changed. Reality changed to be what he said. And he said that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise again from the dead. That makes it true. And that's why the angels were a little sharp with the women who came to the tomb to finish embalming his body. They asked, "What are you doing here? Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Don't you remember what he said?" The angels were telling them to get rid of their old, worldly perception. They thought along with the rest of the world that dead is dead and that's the end of it. Jesus died, so he's gone for good. The angels are saying, "No. He said he'd rise; therefore, he's alive, just as he told you."

And he said more than that. He said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my Word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has passed over from death to life." What that means is that we who believe in him and the forgiveness that he died to attain for us are not dying with the rest of humanity. It means that we are living among the dead. And this is true because he said it – regardless of how things seem to appear from our perspective.

A fellow pastor told me this story. It happened that while he was on his vicarage he served in a congregation that is part of the SELC District. What's that? Well, most of our LCMS churches have a German history; but the SELC churches are Slovakian in origin. Anyway, a member of the church had died, and the vicar was asked to lead the funeral service. As part of his preparations he opened up the records to find out when the fellow had been born, and baptized, and confirmed, and so forth; and when he did he made a rather strange discovery. This would have been in 1995 or so, but it turns out that there was for this individual a death entry already recorded in the book dated back in 1944. The entry had been crossed out and above it something had been written – but in was in Slovak so the vicar couldn't read it. When he asked, it was explained to him that the fellow who had just passed away had been in the Army Air Corps in WWII. He was assigned as a crew member on a bomber that had been shot down. The plane was lost somewhere in enemy territory over southeast Europe, and other flight crews had reported seeing it go down in flames. The Germans didn't report having captured anyone alive from the wreckage. When nothing was heard for several more months, it was assumed he had been killed along with everyone else aboard the plane. All the evidence suggested that it was so. But in fact, the fellow had managed to parachute from the plane. He'd been rescued by members of the Yugoslav resistance, who, as you know, operated covertly and were therefore unable to contact anyone about his rescue. Meanwhile, back home, they'd gone ahead and done a memorial service. They even placed a bronze plaque on the wall in the church for him with those for the other service members who had died in the war. As far as they were concerned, he was dead.

It was more than a year later that he was repatriated, and word finally got back to the family that he was indeed alive and well. So, the pastor at the time had crossed out the original death entry in the church record and wrote above it very simply "He lives." What sweet comfort that vicar had to offer the survivors at the man's second funeral. Once again, all the evidence suggested that the fellow was dead. They had seen his cold, lifeless body. They had sealed his casket and were just about to put his body in the ground. But that vicar was able to say with confidence, "Forget what you think you see. He lives. He is not here. Though this cemetery may be filled with corpses, this is one of the living among the dead. And one day these remains that we leave here now will rise again. Because he lived in faith in Jesus who conquered death, he lives even now; and just as Christ rose bodily from the dead, so will he when Christ says so."

It's no coincidence that the traditional Easter greeting and response that we spoke at the beginning of this service are also the very last words spoken at graveside when we lay to rest the mortal remains of our loved ones. It's a powerful statement of faith in Christ and his resurrection. We're saying that we are certain that this is not the end. We're saying what was so clearly echoed in the words of the last hymn we sang:

Jesus lives! The victory's won! Death no longer can appall me;
Jesus lives! Death's reign is done! From the grave will Christ recall me.
Brighter scenes will then commence; This shall be my confidence.

Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia! Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!