

The Truth

In the name of him who has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, dear friends in Christ: When being questioned by Pontius Pilate about the charges leveled against him, our Lord Jesus answered, “I have come into this world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.” To this Pilate asked in reply, “What is truth?”

I doubt that Pilate meant it sincerely, but his remains good question – one that people are grappling with now more than ever. *What is truth?* And just as importantly, where or to whom do go to find it? It’s a challenge these days. Listen to the same news story from two different networks and you’d never know it was the same story. Reporting on the same data, one says the economy is booming the other says it’s going bust. Both networks accuse the other of spreading fake news. *But what is the truth?* How’s anyone to know?

It’s not just the news. It’s more foundational than that. These days feelings rather than facts seem to be most important when determining truth. Take Rachel Levine, a pediatrician and currently the US Assistant Secretary for Health. He’s a man who insists that he’s a woman. Why? Because he feels like a woman. That makes it true. Forget simple things like biology, we citizens who pay his salary are expected to play along with his fantasy. The real truth is that he looks more like the Quaker Oats guy with a mop on his head than a woman. Yet he was named one of *Time* magazine’s women of the year. They get it. Not to be outdone, the satirical *Babylon Bee* named him their *man* of the year – and they were deplatformed by several social media providers for stating the obvious truth.

Then we’ve got Mark Zuckerberg, the man who gave us Facebook (the curse or the blessing. You decide.) Now he and his tech geniuses are working on a thing called the metaverse. Think of it as a digital fantasy land. You don’t like the world you live in? No problem. You can create your own world and live in it. You get to make up the rules for how your world works. You get to play God (where have I heard that before? As I recall, it didn’t turn out well).

What this is all about – this confusion over truth – is that very often we don’t like the truth and want to pretend that it doesn’t exist. And there’s plenty in this world not to 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 – though since it is unequal, we’re happy to be living in a land that is unequal in our favor. 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. That’s the truth.

But rather than face reality, a lot of people – including each of us at least some of the time – would rather redefine truth. 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. That way you can say you did your part. You don’t like crime? Then stock up on guns and ammo and 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 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? It's easy.

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 healthier and living longer than ever before. 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 thaw you out and 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 many modern thinkers do and they work awfully hard to convince themselves of it. You see, it's not death we're heading for: no, it's nothingness. It's oblivion. There's nothing beyond this life. So what we're doing now is living – and that's all there is. So make the most of it. Enjoy the ride because when it's over, it's over.

Even mortuaries are playing along. They no longer call funerals "funerals". That's a depressing word that speaks of death and mourning. Now we'll call them "celebration of life" services. We'll think happy thoughts about the deceased and exchange good memories so we can avoid the hard, cold truth lying in the casket: the person is dead.

Hey, but if I deny it or don't think about it, I can avoid the thought that one day I'll be dead too. *That's* the truth we all want to push out of our minds. But denying it doesn't make it any less true. You cannot defy the Law of God – and of chief importance for our discussion today, you cannot defy the Law of God that says the soul that sins must die. The view that says "what we're doing now is living" is wrong. 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. That's the truth. 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 is given in today's Scripture readings. There we read the truth that in Adam all die. That means that every one of Adam's descendants is destined for the grave. 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 firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. That means as sure as he is risen, we 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 what you want it to be. You're doing the same thing as Rachel Levine." Not so. You see, you and I can only use words to describe reality. We can say that white is black and black is white for instance; but our words do not make it true.

With Jesus it's different. What he says is true because he is the Truth. 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. 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. The women 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 would rise; therefore he's alive, just as he told you."

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. 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 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, baptized, confirmed, and so forth. So doing, he discovered something strange. 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 1944. The entry had been crossed out and above it something had been written – but it was in Slovak so the vicar couldn't read it. When he asked, it was explained to him that the fellow who had passed away had been in the Army Air Corps in WWII. He was a crew member on a bomber that had been shot down. The plane was lost somewhere over southeast Europe. Other flight crews 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 on the plane. All the evidence said 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 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 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 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. That's the truth. It bears saying again now: Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia! Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!