

Can the Dead Live?

7th Sun. after Pent. – 7/11/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Mark 6:14-29 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 16 [King Herod heard of Jesus' miraculous power and concluded,] **“John, whom I beheaded has been raised.”**

Introduction

⊗ “The Walking Dead”, “Night of the Living Dead”, “Z Nation” – These are some of the most popular Zombie shows/movies out there. In fact, it's scary how successful the Zombie business has been in recent years. Like a Zombie, as soon as you think the fad is finally dead, it just seems to come back at you again.

→ Why are we human beings so fascinated with zombies? I've asked this over and over again. I think it's connected to a human fear and fascination with death.

→ Death is at the same time both mysterious and frightening. Science can tell us the mechanics of death. The body simply stops working. The organs shut down and the body goes absolutely unresponsive.

I. Our instinctive hope – death is not the end.

⊗ But then, there is the mysterious side of things. Is it true that our body and organs just shut down and we then cease to exist? Or can the body be made alive again? Wonder and curiosity, speculation and fantasy abound not only in zombie shows, but all throughout the entertainment industry, the greeting card companies and the general public.

→ Do people become angels when they die? Do they “watch over” us here on earth as we hear about so often? Are we reincarnated into different life forms or do we inhabit alternative planets and realities?

→ For centuries, people have imagined the dead coming back to life through various forms of extraordinary powers. Zombies, the living dead, originated in cultures heavily influenced by voodoo. Western cultures like ours are influenced by the Greek and Roman myths. And witchcraft, in its various flavors, has softened and popularized the false ideas of ghosts sticking around to haunt and pester people after someone has died.

⊗ The hope that underlies all of these stories and myths, both ancient and modern, is that death is not the end.

→ In today's Gospel Reading we see that the Jews of Jesus' day also believed that death was not the end. According to verse 14, a lot of people didn't know what to make of Jesus and His various displays of miraculous power. They just couldn't believe the truth – that He was the actual Son of God, now living among them in the flesh. So they wondered instead whether He was John the Baptist, now raised from the dead, or Elijah or some other prophet from of old (v.15) who was haunting them.

⊗ Herod Antipas, son of the infamous Herod the Great, bought into the first idea - that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (v. 16). And it's no wonder that this horror came to his mind, since he was the one who ordered that John was beheaded because of a foolish promise he made to his step-daughter during a drunken, lust-filled feast (vv. 22–28).

- It's pretty common for people with a guilty conscience to think someone from the dead is taunting them or coming back for revenge or the like.
- And verse 17 shows us that Herod had plenty of reason to have a guilty conscience, since he and Herodias, his brother's wife, had a very public and scandalous love affair and marriage.
- ✘ It seems that John the Baptist, God's fiery desert prophet and preacher of repentance could not let this disgraceful behavior go unaddressed. And so, as we're told in verse 18 that he said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife".
 - He knew this would not be popular or physically safe in light of the Herod family reputation of killing those who questioned their authority or posed a threat to their fame. But John did what a faithful prophet and preacher of God must do. He proclaimed God's unchanging Law in all of its force and severity, regardless of the position, power, and influence of the person.
 - Like the Old Testament prophet Nathan, who looked David, the most powerful king of Israel, in the face and declared, "You are the man who deserves to die for committing adultery, and for murdering the woman's husband and for trying to cover your sin," so John declared how these public actions by Herod and Herodias were a direct offense to the Lord our God.

II. God's Ministry to those with a guilty conscience

- ✘ After all, that is the primary purpose of God's Law; His Ten Commandments; to say, "Repent, O man, O woman, O child! It is not lawful for you to have other gods, to misuse the Lord's name; to despise His Word and Sacraments; to dishonor parents and other authorities; to murder your neighbor with hatred and envy; to lust after sexual intimacy with someone whom God has not given you as your husband or wife; to steal by taking what isn't yours or by not giving what you rightfully owe; to destroy your neighbor's good name and reputation while you deceptively say that you're "speaking the truth"; or to desire anything or anyone that the Lord hasn't given to you." Yes, the Law speaks loudly and clearly to you and to me as Christians still today. "It is not lawful...".
 - And when it does so along with the Holy Spirit, then our sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, produce a guilty conscience within us. Make no mistake, Herod knew his sin with Herodias. And as verse 20 tells us, he also knew John "was a righteous and holy man". So his conflicted, guilty conscience led him to follow the murderous madness of his wife's rage against John for pointing out their sin and he threw John into prison (v 17).
 - Herod was clearly struggling inside between the truth he was hearing from John and the evil he was hearing and desiring regarding his wife. So he protected John and even "gladly" heard him, verse 20 says. It's odd, isn't it? Herod gladly hears the man that he wrongfully imprisons; the same man telling him that living and eating and sleeping with Herodias is an offense to God.
- ✘ But that shouldn't seem all that strange to us, if we're honest with ourselves. After all, I'm sure you've all noticed, as I have myself over the years, that when you're struggling with a particular sin, the Church and her pastors then become both attractive and repelling at the same time? And when you hear the truth of God's Word proclaimed your guilty conscience says, "How does he know about my sin? Why is he preaching directly to me? Who does he think he is to single me out from everyone else?!"
 - In fact Christians will sometimes quit coming to hear God's Word and to receive Christ's body and blood when their conscience tells them that they are violating God's Law. And yet, often, they will be the first to defend the Church when outsiders speak ill of it.

- Why? because deep inside they love the Church, her pastors and members, even while they refuse to join them regularly and joyfully. It's a zombie-like existence that they lead: not quite dead to the things of God but neither living in them as God desires.
- ✘ It doesn't make sense. But sin seldom makes sense. The apostle Paul described his own inner struggle with his sinful condition in Romans 7:22–24, "For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" You see there, within the same man we find faith and unbelief; the desire for sin and the desire for righteousness.

III. Deliverance from a guilty conscience in Jesus

- ✘ So who can; who will deliver us from the living death of a guilty conscience? There is only one answer; only one man. It is the one whom Herod thought was John the Baptist returned from the dead: Jesus, the miracle-worker from Nazareth.
 - Through your baptismal connection to Jesus, you have been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. And that means that you are no longer walking in the futility of a sinful mind that is neither alive to God nor at home in this fallen world. There are no zombies in Christ, folks – either in the body or in the Spirit.
 - As our Epistle Reading says today in Ephesians 1:13, you have "heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him". Yes, in Jesus, you have been made new. You are fully alive; fully alert in spirit and mind. Your peace with God and man is now fully restored.
- ✘ This tragic death of John the Baptist shows us the ultimate power and purpose of the mission and ministry of Jesus; why He came; what He has done for us all.
 - The blatant scandal and disgust that we see in Herod and Herodias's behavior should serve as a warning for us all. Sin is corrosive; it tears apart families and lives every time – not just sexual sin, but any and every violation of God's good and Holy Law. And we dare never allow ourselves to think that such sordid sins only happen to others. Inside each one of us is a world of sins.
- ✘ And Jesus came to save us from their destruction through His life, death, and resurrection. So, daily as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done", we live in the hope and confidence, as Luther says in His explanation to this petition, that God our Father "breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come" (Luther's Small Catechism, pg. 252).
 - Yes, the gruesome death of John serves to point us to Jesus' death soon after under a different government official, Pontius Pilate, who likewise declared his victim innocent and righteous as he cowered under the pressure of others. Likewise, as John's disciples took his body "and laid it in a tomb" (v. 29), so Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus' disciples, took His crucified body from Pilate and laid Him in a tomb. John lived and died in prophecy; as a foreshadowing to the mission and ministry of Jesus.
- ✘ But the joyous difference between the prophecy and the prophecy's fulfillment is that Jesus actually did rise from the dead on the third day. And in doing so, He destroyed the power and the fear and even the mystery of death and the devil.
 - You see, there is no reason for us Christians to wonder about or speculate about death or any of its myths and fantasies like zombies or ghosts. Because we know that death comes because of our own sin. Even more though we know that death and sin have been destroyed by

Jesus so that we have, even now today, been justified unto eternal life (Rom. 4:25), and washed in baptism, as Hebrews 10:22 says, so that our consciences are clean.

Conclusion

⌘ It's time then, to put those earthly fears and fantasies and falsehoods aside for good, dear believers. Because this is very real: Jesus is not part of the "Living Dead". He is the Living Conqueror!

➔ And because Jesus lives, you live – pure, clean and holy in the sight of God and His heavenly host. Death is not the end; sin and a guilty conscience are never permanent. Jesus is no mere human ghost or spirit. He is the promised Son of God; your Savior and mine to free us from sin's guilt and restore our place in eternal peace and forgiveness before the King of kings. To Him be all glory, today and forever. Amen.