

Easter, March 31, 2024

He Descended Into Hell, The Third Day He Rose Again From The Dead

18 For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, 19 through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.

In the Creed we confess, "He descended into hell, the third day he rose again from the dead." And this is the simple Easter message for us, in Peter's words: "He was put to death in the body, but he was made alive by the Spirit." Jesus was raised from the dead; he is risen. And the marvelous result of Easter and Christ's resurrection is first, that Jesus accomplished what he said he would accomplish. Second, that God the Father accepted all of the work of God the Son, not leaving him in the grave, but raising him to life. This means we can be certain that his obedient life, keeping all God's commandments, stands in place of our poor deeds, our sinful deeds, and our absent deeds. Also, Christ gave up his life on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. That's what Peter means when he says, "Christ died for sins "once for all." There is no more payment to be made.

Third, the resurrection of Jesus is very much like the first Robin of spring-- but for our own resurrection. And just as there are Robins around sometimes all winter long, so also the news of Jesus' resurrection is always with us to comfort us and to guide our godly living.

All of the things Jesus did for us, he did, Peter writes, "to bring you to God." The life of Jesus is the Gospel, and the Gospel is what plants faith in our hearts. By trusting in Jesus, we are carried to our Father in heaven, and the way is open to us on account of Jesus.

Peter says, "he was made alive." What does that mean? Is Jesus alive as a spirit, or as a good memory, as a fine example for godly living? Those things are true, I suppose, in the same way that a good meal has a nice aroma. That's not the main thing for the meal; that's not what fill us up and nourishes us. What "made alive" means is that Jesus' dead body came back to life, and he remains alive today, ascended into heaven, and he will be alive with us forever in heaven.

Peter continues: "He went and preached to the spirits in prison." If you are taking notes on your sermon card, it might help to make a reference here to Colossians 2:15, another passage that describes Jesus' descent into hell. Colossians 2:15 says, "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

Based on these passage, we believe and teach that early on Easter Sunday-- very early-- Jesus Christ came alive once again. His spirit, which had left his body in death to return briefly to the Father, now returned to his flesh. He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,^a and his lungs filled once again. His heart began beating again; his eyes opened once again, and he was alive, a living being.

Then, in his glorified body he descended into hell, the prison of the damned. He had already suffered the pain of hell on the cross. He did not suffer now. This is certain because, on the cross, Jesus proclaimed that his work of suffering for our sins was finished (John 19:30). Therefore he did not descend into hell on Easter to suffer, but to preach.

Now, the word “preach” often implies preaching the gospel to save souls, to turn people to repentance, and to create faith. This is not what Jesus did when he descended into hell. For Jesus also said about those who are in hell, “Between heaven and hell a great chasm has been put in place, so that even if someone wanted to go from heaven to hell, they cannot, nor can anyone ever cross over from hell to heaven” (Luke 16:26).

Who did he preach to? Everyone who was there. This included the devil and the other fallen angels which we sometimes call the demons (Luther sometimes called them “goblins”), and those human men and women from all of human history who died without faith in Christ. For just as faith alone saves, so also, only unbelief damns (Mark 16:16).

What did Jesus preach about? Paul tells us that this was a “triumph,” which had a unique meaning in ancient times. This was the triumphal procession of a victor who could demonstrate his success by carrying or marching his vanquished foes with him, chained and helpless. But Luke 16 also tells us that those who are in hell, as part of their punishment for unbelief, still do not understand faith, grace, Christ’s work, or the way to heaven. Those things would do them no good. And so Jesus entered hell to announce and to convince them that he, Jesus, was truly that Savior that they had rejected. Denying him was and is the reason for their condemnation, their penalty, and their continuing suffering there.

As far back as the Garden of Eden, God had promised all this. He told the devil then, “I will put enmity, hatred, between you and the woman, and between your offspring (unbelievers) and hers (that is, Christ). He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Well, Satan, Dr. Jesus entered into hell to give you the final diagnosis, even though you wanted to deny it: Your head is crushed; smashed in by the cross of Christ.

^a Genesis 2:7

The doctrine of Jesus' descent into hell reminds us that hell is real. It is a moment of preaching that was not for our ears. But it is certainly proclaimed for our understanding in Scripture. It teaches us: **(1) That hell is the real prison of all who reject Christ.** Therefore we are right to fear hell, to be terrified of its punishments, and therefore this is part of God's way of shouting to us: "Stop your sinning! End your sinful lifestyle. So many in hell once knew Christ and even spoke with God—Cain, Judas, Saul, Korah, Dathan, and many others heard the word of God, sat in God's congregation, but did not put their faith in Jesus Christ. Turn from your sins and trust in Jesus alone for forgiveness, and leave your sinful life and actions behind.

(2) Second, Jesus' work of salvation is complete. All of us with faith in Christ will never taste the punishment of hell; and the Bible teaches no other destination of the dead apart from hell for unbelievers and heaven for believers. There is no middle ground. When you and I one day close our eyes in death, we will open the eyes of our spirit immediately and without delay in heaven, and on the Last Day our spirits will be reunited with our resurrection bodies.

Jesus, the First Robin of the Springtime of the Resurrection, proves the resurrection for us all.

1. His resurrection was the *natural consequence* of his obedient suffering and death.
2. It was impossible for Jesus' body to remain in death, and therefore his resurrection is the *supreme proof* of his **divinity**. (Romans 1:4)
3. Jesus repeatedly referred to his resurrection as the ultimate proof of his *Messiahship*, the proof that he is the Christ. (Matthew 16:4)
4. The resurrection of Jesus is the unshakable witness of the salvation—the **justification of all mankind**. Since he offered his life for us all, and then died and rose from the dead, his work was completed, and as Paul said, "He was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25).
5. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead *is the basis of all Christian Faith*. It gives us the assurance of the salvation of our bodies and souls.

In Jesus alone, your sins are forgiven, you are at peace with God, and you have a place with Jesus prepared for you in heaven. And because he lives, we, too, shall live, risen to life like Jesus, the First Robin our Springtime. Amen.

Those who want to read more about what the Bible teaches about Jesus' descent into hell can find help in Dr. John Schaller's "Biblical Christology" p. 102-105, in our church Library.

