

The Miracle of the Resurrection from the Dead and Descent into Hell

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for this Easter Sunday is from the Apostles' Creed. **“. . . was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead.”** Here ends our text.

He descended into hell! He descended into hell, indeed! Alleluia! Wait a minute. That's not our usual Easter greeting of "He is risen!" And yet, it's still appropriate to say on Easter morning because Christ's descent into hell was the first act he did when he rose from the dead and began his exalted state. We confess regularly in the Apostles' Creed that Jesus "descended into hell." But just when and how and why did this happen? I don't remember anything about Christ descending into hell in the Gospel accounts of his death and resurrection. They buried him on Friday, rolled a stone in front of the tomb, posted a guard, and then on Sunday morning they find the tomb empty and see Jesus risen from the dead. Why do we squeeze that line "He descended into hell," in between his burial and his resurrection appearance? Well, that truth isn't revealed to us in the Gospel accounts, but it is revealed in the first Epistle of Peter. **"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, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built."**

According to these verses, first Jesus died, then he was made alive by the Holy Spirit, and then he went to the spirits in prison, that is hell. The context following these verses speaks of Jesus' resurrection and then his ascension into heaven. A more detailed chronology of the chain of events may be summarized as follows:

1. On the cross Jesus says, "It is finished." He tells his Father, "Into Your hands I commit my spirit," and then he breathes his last. His soul separates from his body, and Jesus dies.
2. Jesus' body is buried in the tomb on Friday afternoon.
3. Sometime after Friday and Saturday evening, the Holy Spirit makes Jesus alive. Jesus' body and soul are reunited.
4. Jesus, in body and soul, as true man and true God, passes through the walls of the tomb and descends into hell to the spirits in prison.
5. Early on the third day, Sunday morning, the angel rolls the stone away to show the tomb is empty and declare that Jesus is risen.

But for what purpose did Jesus descend into hell and how does that help us? Did Jesus descend into hell to suffer punishment and torment in body and soul in the flames of hell? No. Jesus experienced all the suffering for our sins during his passion and upon the cross. He was experiencing hell, separation from God, when he cried out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" When full atonement was made to God for our sins, Jesus then said, "It is finished." He didn't say, "I am finished," meaning I am dead, but "It is finished," meaning our debt of sin was fully paid.

Then why did Jesus descend into hell? The verse from Peter's epistle says, **"to preach to the spirits in prison."** As Jesus tells us in Matthew 25, hell was "prepared for the devil and his angels." But when man sinned, it also became the place of torment for the souls of unbelievers when they died, soon to be experienced in both soul and body on Judgment Day following the resurrection of the dead. Was Jesus preaching to these souls to convert them? No. **"Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment."** (Hebrews 9:27) Jesus descended into hell not to give lost souls a second chance, but to show these unbelieving souls the very one they rejected as Lord and Savior. Jesus actually makes his first resurrection appearance, not to the women at the tomb, but to the condemned souls in hell. Jesus descends to preach the Law of their confirmed judgment and just condemnation on the Last Day.

Jesus also descended into hell to proclaim his victory over sin, death, and the devil. He stormed the gates of hell, Satan's home turf, and paraded through its streets in a victory march. He crushed the ancient adversary under his heel. He disarmed Satan of his power to accuse us for sins yet unpunished. The apostle Paul says in Colossians 2, **"You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt**

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that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. And having *disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*" The devil and demons and unbelievers, who mocked and made a spectacle of Christ, his prophets, and Church, are now made a public spectacle by Christ. The reference to a public spectacle is taken from the Roman Caesars and generals to parade the rulers and generals they had conquered through the streets of Rome in a triumphant procession. In his descent into hell, Christ fulfills his promise, **"I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."** Therefore, Christ's descent into hell wasn't part of his State of Humiliation and suffering, but it was part of his State of Exaltation and glory. We believe, teach, and confess that Christ's State of Exaltation begins with his being made alive by the Holy Spirit, followed by his descent into hell, and then continues with his resurrection appearances on earth.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading this morning and our traditional resurrection story. On the dawn of Easter Sunday, the women came to the tomb. Another miracle happens in that there was great earthquake like when the earth shook at Jesus' death. But this earthquake shakes the world with the news of the resurrection of Jesus. An angel of the Lord descended and rolled back the stone, not to let Jesus out – because he has already passed through the walls to descend into hell – but to show that the tomb was empty. The unbelieving soldiers faint for fear, but the angel tells the believing women not to be afraid because they seek Jesus. **"He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead."** As the women ran to tell the disciples, **"Behold, Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!'** They bowed at his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, **"Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."**

After Christ's first appearance to the condemned spirits in hell, Jesus makes his first appearance to the saints on earth. What follows are his many appearances to all the disciples and even 500 believers at the same time. These appearances of the risen Jesus attest to the greatest miracle of Lent – the resurrection of the Son of God from the dead. Those who saw him believed in him. Of course, those who rejected and killed Jesus remained in unbelief, even after this fantastic miracle. When the guards returned to the city and told the chief priests what had happened, they bribed the soldiers with money and said, "Tell people, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.'" This ruse only verifies the miracle of the resurrection, for what soldier would ever willingly implicate himself and risk the death penalty for confessing his dereliction of duty. And conversely, what disciple of Jesus, who formerly fled in fear, would subject themselves to martyrdom and die for a lie? Only belief in the resurrection of Jesus could cause such a change in the disciples. No natural explanation, no cover up, no lie could ever diminish the miracle of the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances of Jesus, and the newborn faith of his disciples.

Which finally brings us to the miracle of Lent which continues from the day of Jesus' resurrection to his return on the Last Day. You have now heard the miracles of Lent surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. The miraculous darkness, the earthquake, and the splitting of the rocks remind us of the plagues, Mt. Sinai, and God's judgment against unbelief and the breaking of His Law. Like the Israelites, the repentant thief, and the disciples, you are led to confess your sin and just wages of death. But the miraculous death of the Son of God, the tearing of the Temple curtain which gives us access to God through his blood, the raising of the saints from death, the miracle of Christ's presence in Holy Communion, and now the resurrection of Jesus in victory proclaim God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness of your sins for eternal life. You are led to confess with the Roman soldiers, "Certainly this man Jesus is the Son of God." This Gospel **"was declared at first by the Lord . . . while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will."** The ongoing sign, wonder, and miracle of Lent is the Holy Spirit's gift of faith in your heart. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior. You anxiously await his return for his final miracle of raising you from the dead and granting you and all believers in him eternal life. Until that day, we rejoice and confess the truth of our salvation. He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.