

He Descended into Hell

^{NRS} **1 Peter 3:18** For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,¹⁹ in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,²⁰ who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.²¹ And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

When I was in seminary, the student housing we lived in was a few miles away from the school. And to get us back and forth we had one of those squatty little buses that would shuttle folks back and forth. And this was OK, but Bob, our bus driver, hated me. You think I'm exaggerating, but it's true. Bob hated me. It wasn't just me- he didn't care for most of us. The only guys he liked on the bus were the guys who would talk football with him- specifically the Philadelphia Eagles, his team. Bob was the kind of guy who worked for a living, and I think it must have been a kind of hell for him to be stuck driving a bus full of seminarians making jokes about Ancient Hebrew and complaining about how hard their lives were because of all the reading. We must have sounded like George Jetson complaining about his button pushing fingers with our whining. Well, nearly every morning when I would make my way to the corner where he was waiting- nearly every morning, always if it was raining, as soon as I hit the sidewalk, no matter what time it was, Bob would see me and just gun the engine, just gun it, and I would have to start running, not a pretty sight, and then he'd have to stop and yell at me for making everybody late. I mean if it was just once or twice, I could understand it. But this was like our morning ritual, this was like my Good Morning wake up call from New Jersey.

But then one morning everything was different. One morning I went outside, headed out towards the bus, made it to the sidewalk, and nothing happened. The engine didn't roar. The bus didn't start going. Nothing. It just sat there, it's diesel engine purring like a cat with a bronchial infection. And when I made it to the bus, I saw the reason why- there was no Bob. In Bob's place was an older woman I had never seen before. As I drew nearer, I could see she was smiling. As I got on she even said hello. It was like some sort of weird dream. Then I sat down. There weren't many people on that day. And I was just kind of looking over some of my notes when she started talking to me. At first it wasn't about much- she was just asking about the seminary and what I wanted to be. Just kind of general interest. But then towards the end, when everybody was getting off she said, "Hey, can I ask you a question?" And I thought- oh no, I knew this morning had been too good to be true. Oh, what was she going to ask? How bad was it going to be?

She looked kind of embarrassed, and she said that she wasn't going to church much right now, but she grew up in the church, and she had a question. So I braced myself and told her to go ahead. And then she asked me a question I would be asked many times since: "Hey, I've always wondered, in that thing you say in church, in the Apostles Creed- why does it say Jesus went to Hell? I don't like that, Jesus going to Hell. Why does it say that?"

And I just stood there, looking at her, not knowing quite what to say.

It's a great question, isn't it? Last week at Jonathan's baptism we said those words. "I believe in God the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus

Christ, his only son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into Hell, the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the father almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.”

Presbyterians say the Apostles Creed at least as often as every baptism- some churches say it every Sunday. And right there, right smack dab in the middle of it, is one of the strangest, grimmest little nuggets you’ll ever come across. He was crucified, dead, was buried, and he descended into Hell. Jesus descended into hell? That is some pretty weird stuff, right? Did you ever wonder about that? What *is* that about?

Oh my friends. This is such an interesting question. This morning we’ll take a closer look at this strange idea in the creed itself, and then talk about where this comes from in the first place by looking at First Peter, and then I’ll do my best to help us see what relevance this might have for us today.

So first off, the Apostles Creed. It’s not really the best name for the creed. The Apostle’s didn’t actually write it- they weren’t really into writing creeds and things like that. They were busy following Jesus and starting churches and avoiding broom headed Romans and their lions. But the first version of the creed was pretty early- most folks put it around the second century- and over a period of time of about 400 years it develops and comes into it’s final form in the 8th century.

Now I know creeds like this make a lot of us nervous today- it feels extremely uncomfortable for a lot of us to stand together and chant this thing like we do in a kind of monotone voice. Sometimes it feels like brain washing. Sometimes it just feels like people are saying things on automatic pilot and not really thinking about any of it. And I think all this can be true- creeds certainly have been used to force belief and hurt and divide people. And they have been used as an excuse for not thinking- no doubt about it.

But this isn't their original purpose. No, the original intent of a creed is really fantastic. See, more than anything else the original intent of the Apostle's Creed is to be a teaching tool for people who don't all know how to read. Most early Christians couldn't read- and even if they could books were incredibly hard to come by. And so the next best thing was to try to get the key points of the faith into a short enough form so that people could memorize it and then talk about it. So, when it was created- the Apostle's Creed wasn't supposed to stop individual thought- it was supposed to prompt it.

All around our house on the walls you'll find little pieces of needlepoint, samplers they are called, and like most samplers in them you'll find either the alphabet or little bits of scripture. And if you look closely you'll see the alphabet isn't always done correctly. Samplers like these started way back in Europe in the 15th century, but they became very common in America in the 19th century, a time where books were often scarce for most people. And so like the creed, people used these samplers to teach people basic things like the alphabet.

So when I recite the Creed I always like to imagine myself living at a time when most people couldn't read, and most had never even seen a Bible, much less owned a

nicely bound copy to keep on the mantle piece. I like to feel this connection with all these people who came before me- people who often didn't have the benefit of education, people who often didn't even have the benefit of a church building. See, for me it's not about whether this is how I would sum up the faith, and to be sure I would do it a lot differently- but for me it's about standing with my grandfathers and grandmothers in the faith.

So what about this weird descent into hell thing? Well interestingly it didn't make the earliest versions of the creed- in fact it was the last thing added. But this doesn't mean it wasn't important- it just means that this idea took time to develop. And the idea is has everything to do with the meaning of the cross. The cross was not an important symbol in the early church- for three hundred years after Jesus you will find no images of the cross. None in the catacombs. None in Christian art. It took time for the church to absorb this image. But with the Emperor Constantine the church began to accept this symbol, and more and more people starting writing about the meaning of it. And they didn't have sophisticated theories saying that when humanity fell we offended God's honor. And God being infinite, our offense was infinite. And this was a problem- because while we were the ones who ought to pay for the offense, because it was infinite we couldn't. And so a figure who was God and man came- and the cross then becomes a symbol uniting humanity with God. No, this kind of thinking would take a good thousand years to develop.

No, the first kind of ideas about the cross, called Christus Victor, have more to do with hell. The early church believed that when Jesus died on the cross- he descended into

Hell. And he did this not for some kind of Rick Steve's tour. Christ descends down into the depths of hell to destroy the gates of hell from within. And the meaning of this for the church is this incredible good news- is there a hell? Absolutely. Do we need to be afraid of it? Absolutely not. Jesus Christ has come down to whatever deep, dark Hell we find ourselves in. And this gives us the hope to hang in there- and it's even given some the courage to fight against political and social systems that create literally a hell on earth.

Once when he was preaching in a South African church Bishop Tutu talks about soldiers bursting into the sanctuary and one pointing a rifle at him as he was preaching. And without missing a beat- he stepped right out of the pulpit and approached the young man with this enormous smile. And he told the young man to put his gun down and join the winning side. This wasn't arrogance. This was faith that Christ had already descended into the Hell of apartheid and destroyed it- it was just up to people like Desmond Tutu to spread the word.

So when we say in the Apostles Creed that Jesus descends into Hell- this isn't bad news for Jesus. This is bad news for Hell. And it's good news for everyone else on earth- because when we hear this our hope, our trust, is that whatever hell we're living in, whatever hell our loved ones are living in- Jesus has been there, and even though it may not seem like it- it's days are numbered.

But this idea didn't come from the Apostles' Creed- it comes first from scripture. It comes from texts like the one we have before us this morning in First Peter. Now to understand what's going on here, you have to know that the letter of First Peter is

obsessed with Israel. Throughout the letter of First Peter, like an *idée fixe*, we hear how the church is like Israel wandering through the wilderness, and how every church member is a priest, how you and I form a royal priesthood of believers. And one of the things that bugs First Peter is something that bugs some of us.

One of the most popular stories of the Old Testament, one of the stories that everybody knows is the story of Noah and the flood. And you know how it goes. Everything's really bright and happy, and Noah's this smiling guy on the ark and it's filled with lions and tigers and bears. And that's pretty much it, right? I mean we have one of those Little People arks- everyone's smiling. That's gotta be the story.

Oh yeah, it's a little darker, right? We've talked about this before. God gets angry everyone is running around hurting one another. And God gets so angry, God sends a flood and wipes everyone out- everyone but Noah and his family. And it's like, "Well, I liked the first version better."

And this is pretty much how the writer of First Peter feels, too. And so here he's telling the congregation, hey, do you remember that story we love- that story about Noah. And do you remember what a bummer it was that God wiped out all those people and started over again. Do you remember that? Well that's how it ended in Genesis- but it wasn't the end of the story. Nope. Not by a long shot. When Christ died, do you know what he did? Though he was dead in the flesh, he was very much alive in the spirit- and he actually went down, all the way down, to those people down there, those people who were disobedient, those people God flooded out- and he told them the good news, the good news that even people in Hell, even people who screwed up, were worth keeping, were worth keeping and bringing back to life.

And this isn't the only passage you hear this- but it's one of the main ones. And together the earliest church believed that do people make choices? You bet. Do these choices matter? You bet. God doesn't turn a blind eye to injustice. But does this mean that God consigns people to destruction forever and forever? Absolutely not. The greatest thinkers of the early church all agreed on this- the very meaning of Christ is that everyone, everyone, no matter how grave our sin, God is able to see something of value in us. We simply aren't powerful enough to wipe out the image of God in us- not forever anyway.

You know, I still think about that woman on the bus. I really didn't know what to say to her about her question. She kind of caught me off guard a little. Honestly, I really didn't know much at that point about the Creed or why it talks about Hell. Today, though, today if I had it to do over again I'd say this, I'd probably say Christ descended into hell so that we would know, *even in New Jersey*, that he would be able to find us. And he descended into hell so that we would know that when we find ourselves there, it will be for a season, for a time, but not forever. **Amen.**