

Thursday · May 14, 2026

He Descended into Hell

| **1 Peter 3:19** — *In which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.*

Every Sunday, Christians around the world say it in the Apostles' Creed: 'He descended into hell.' We say it, but we may not always stop to think about it. What does it mean? Why does the Church confess it? And what does Peter have to do with it?

This verse is one of the most mysterious in all of Scripture — and that is precisely what makes it worth sitting with. The 'spirits in prison' that Christ proclaimed to are, in the Lutheran understanding, not souls awaiting release, but the defeated powers of evil — the spiritual forces that believed they had won on Good Friday and found out on Easter that they had lost. Christ's descent was not a rescue mission; it was a victory proclamation. He went to the very stronghold of the enemy and announced: I have won.

The Formula of Concord — the great Lutheran confessional document — addresses this article with a sermon of Luther and says, in essence, that the best way to understand this is through art and image rather than philosophical debate. The descent into hell is not something we can diagram neatly. It is something we confess and marvel at.

And the Creed is exactly the right place to confess it. What we say in worship on Sunday is not merely liturgical habit. It is the Church's testimony across twenty centuries that this Jesus — born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, dead and buried — descended into the realm of the dead and emerged as Lord over even that. Death had no hold on him. Hell could not contain him. He proclaimed his victory to every power that opposed him, and then he rose.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Christians have included 'he descended into hell' in the Creed for so many centuries? What does it add to our understanding of what Jesus accomplished?
2. If Christ's descent was a victory proclamation — announcing his triumph even to the powers of evil — what does that say about the nature of his resurrection?
3. What does it mean to you personally that Jesus is Lord not just over the good things in the world, but over death and hell itself?

Closing Prayer

Lord of life and death, you descended to the lowest place and rose triumphant. There is no depth to which you have not gone, no darkness you have not entered, no power you have not overcome. When we feel surrounded by forces we cannot fight, remind us that you have already fought them — and won. You are Lord over everything, even the things that frighten us most. Amen.

Family Action Item

Look up the Apostles' Creed together as a family (it's in your hymnal or can be found online). Read it aloud slowly, pausing at 'he descended into hell.' Talk about what it means to confess something as a church family every week — and how this week's devotions have helped that line come alive.

