

Easter In-Person Celebration 2020

(Since Easter Sunday was on-line only due to the COVID-19 shutdown)

Today's Title: "**Victorious Descent**"

June 14, 2020 – *Selected passages*

Objective: To help people realize that Holy Saturday was Jesus' first declaration of victory over sin and death - and He transformed Paradise forever by His actions.

What happens when we die?

What happens to our body - to our soul?

What happened to Jesus when He died?

What happened to His body?

What happened to His soul?

I hope to answer some of those questions this morning.

The Christian calendar is not very familiar to many of us - not because we're not Christians - but our philosophy and style of church is less formal.

We celebrate **Thanksgiving, Advent, Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter**, and occasionally **Reformation Sunday**.

We may mention or allude to "**Pentecost Sunday**" or "**Ascension Sunday**".

Epiphany Day - or '**3 Kings Day**' - is celebrated in some churches - and it is 12 days after Christmas - and it commemorates the visit of the Wise Men to the Christ child.

Lent - a stretch of 40 days (not counting Sundays) which begins on **Ash Wednesday** and is a time for self-examination and repentance through some form of self-denial. This is done in

preparation for Easter. Lent ends either on the evening of **Maundy Thursday** or at sundown on **Holy Saturday**.

Holy Saturday is the day after Good Friday - the day before Easter.

For many - **Holy Saturday** is a lull on Easter weekend.

It's a time of waiting for Sunday to arrive - waiting to celebrate the resurrection.

But **Holy Saturday** was not a 'day off' for Jesus.

While everyone who was alive waited - and the Jews observed the Sabbath - Jesus was at work.

Holy Saturday in the narrative account of the Gospels, is a fairly quiet day, but there was some activity.

Matthew 27:62-66

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate

63 and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while He was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.'

64 Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples go and steal Him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first."

65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can."

66 So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

As preparations are made outside the tomb to maintain the status quo, Jesus was busy - or shall I say His soul was busy - bringing an eternal end to the status quo!

In the early centuries of the Church, due to the events which took place on **Holy Saturday** - what's called *'the doctrine of descent'* was compiled from the Biblical revelation.

Holy Saturday is something I never heard about growing up - never celebrated - and as a result, never even thought about.

Ephesians 4:9 - The doctrine of descent in a 'nutshell'.

In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?

When Jesus "descended into the lower regions, the earth?" - what does that mean? What is that talking about?

As you might imagine, there are different views on this topic - and on some of these verses we'll look at this morning.

But, when you take them as a whole - and when you look at the pattern we see in the Bible of God descending and ascending to and from the earth - to minister and reveal - we see the same pattern applied to Jesus and His descending to the dead on **Holy Saturday**.

There are numerous passages that speak to Jesus' activity on **Holy Saturday** - or make reference to some aspect of His work. I have listed them for you in your notes - but I won't be able to cover each passage due to the time restraints - and I'm sure you don't want to sit here and listen to me for the next 1 ½ hours as I attempt to do so.

Why does this matter?

Because:

1. Jesus' work on Holy Saturday was the first *'public'* declaration of His victory over death and sin.
2. His work on Holy Saturday transformed "paradise" (Luke 23:43).
3. Jesus' work on Holy Saturday - His *'descent to the dead'* - encourages us today when we encounter the death of a Christian - or as we anticipate our own death.

The location of the dead in the O.T.

In the O.T. - but also parts of the N.T., you will read passages that speak of *Sheol* - often used to describe a place for the wicked after death - but not always.

Another term you read is *'gathered to their fathers'* - which in a literal way often refers to the body of the deceased being placed into the ancestral tomb - with those who had died previously (different compartments in these tombs). But there is a spiritual - after-life aspect to this term also.

Other terms you read are *'Abraham's bosom'*, *'paradise'*, *'the abyss'*, *'Tartarus'*, *'Hades'*, *'heaven'*, *'Gehenna'*, *'the lake of fire'*, *'under the earth'*, *'beyond the sea'*, and *'the third heaven'*.

The details of the afterlife increase and gain clarity with the revelation of the N.T. and the details of heaven.

However, in much of the Biblical terminology, we have an afterlife thought of in 3 'compartments' - with each

compartment being a preliminary blessing or judgment - based on the person's faith or lack of faith - and their level of wickedness.

Figure 2.2 - The Place of the Dead - p. 33

- The place of the righteous dead: *Paradise, Abraham's Bosom*
- The place of the unrighteous dead: *Hades, Sheol, Gehenna*
- The prison for fallen angels (demons): *Tartarus*

A helpful text for understanding this line of thinking (compartments) is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus that Jesus tells in:

Luke 16:23-26

“The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side (bosom). The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.

But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’

This passage is a parable - so we need to keep that in mind whenever we use it as a basis for specific details,

but it seems that Jesus is pulling back the window coverings of the afterlife just enough for us to get a glimpse into the unseen, spiritual world.

The 3 major things to see in this text:

First, there is suffering (“torment”) - and there is comfort in the next life based on this life.

Second, there is a chasm separating the two places - a chasm that cannot be crossed.

Third, communication seems possible across the chasm - at least by some. This will be important in a later point this morning.

The afterlife - the next life - was a belief in O.T. times - before the resurrection - before the Church age - and the beliefs about the afterlife were connected to blessing and comfort - joy for those with faith in God - and “torment” - suffering for those who lived for themselves with no faith in God.

The Apostle’s Creed...

Earliest known record dates to 390 A.D.

The creed is not inspired - not Scripture - but it’s based on Scripture - a summary statement of what we believe. We sing parts of this creed in songs - and it’s been part of Christian heritage and tradition for 1600 years.

Apostles Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell. (to the dead)
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

We're not a '*creedal church*' - which simply means we don't recite the creed on a regular basis - and it's not a staple text of our normal teaching.

What's called the '*doctrine of the descent*' is summarized in the creed - by the phrase, "*He descended to the dead*". Other versions say, "*He descended to hell*" - but the use of the word '*hell*' in those versions is not referring to the place of suffering, but in general to the place of the dead - the afterlife.

What is the '*doctrine of the descent*' - and why should we bother learning about it?

Jesus descended to the righteous dead.

This truth impacts us!

The first thing to understand about the doctrine is that it teaches Jesus, when He was dead, His body lay in the grave, while His soul / spirit descended to the dead.

Specifically, it descended to the place of the righteous dead.

Those who had died throughout history - who had saving faith - exist in a disembodied state - waiting for the fulfillment of the Messianic promises and when they will receive their resurrected, glorified bodies and enter into the eternal state and the eternal blessings of heaven. I am not describing Purgatory - but a disembodied spiritual state of blessedness.

Matt. 12:40

“For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Death was real for Jesus. He experienced human death - as all humanity does - which is another way in which He is a “merciful and faithful high priest” (Heb. 2:17) who has experienced what we experience.

When Jesus died, His soul / spirit descended to the place of the righteous dead to announce His victory over sin and death.

Eph. 4:8-10 (quotes Psalm 68)

Therefore it says, “When He ascended on high He led a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men.”

9 (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that He had also descended into the lower regions, the earth?)

10 He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

1 Peter 4:6

“For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.”

When He died, Jesus descended to the dead - not to a place of torment - not to ‘Hell’ or Gehenna or Tartarus or the Lake of Fire - He didn’t go to the place where the unrighteous dead exist in their disembodied state - but He descended to the place where the righteous dead await the fulfillment of all things.

Jesus transformed paradise / Abraham’s bosom.

When this happened, the righteous dead (O.T. saints) had been waiting for the fulfillment of the promises they had believed.

Hebrews 11:39

“And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised...”

“The presence of Jesus in paradise, though, changes its entire constitution. Rather than being a place where the righteous dead await the coming of Israel’s promised Messiah, the Christ (Messiah) is now in their

midst...He is present with them in human soul, and then, after the ascension, He is present with them bodily.”

(He Descended to the Dead”, An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday, by Matthew Y. Emerson, p. 133)

When Jesus tells the thief on the cross, “today you will be with Me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43), He is promising to be with him - in the place of the righteous dead.

Matthew Emerson, in his book, He Descended to the Dead, continues:

“Paradise, because of the descent and the coming resurrection and ascension, experiences a shift in its reality. It is no longer full of the righteous dead waiting for the Messiah but is now a place where the resurrected and ascended Messiah dwells with His people. They still wait (for their bodily resurrection and eternal state) but with the resurrected Second Adam - the first fruits of their own coming resurrection - in their midst... From messianic hope to Christological reality.”

(He Descended to the Dead”, An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday, by Matthew Y. Emerson, p. 134-135)

This is not some abstract doctrine from ancient Church history.

If Jesus doesn't return first, what I just described is what each one of us will experience when we die. We will enter the presence of Jesus when we die - not just a presence filled with promises!

The transformation of paradise / Abraham's bosom brings the Christian great blessing and great comfort since each of us will experience death.

Jesus descended to proclaim victory to the unrighteous and the demonic forces.

When we die, we don't yet have our resurrection body - but our soul/spirit exists in heaven, but in a disembodied state. This is a glorious state - not a negative state - but it's also not the final, completed, eternal state of glorification.

Because of Jesus' work on Holy Saturday - that existence is now in a Christ-inhabited place - but that's not the only thing He accomplished on that day.

Remember the parable Jesus told about the rich man and the poor man named Lazarus - and that it seems some are able to communicate across the chasm which separates the righteous dead who are blessed and comforted from the unrighteous dead who are in torment?

On **Holy Saturday** - Jesus had a victory dance - He announced His victory - His triumph over death, sin and the Devil.

1 Peter 3:18-22

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh

but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water...

who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to Him.”

1 Peter 4:6

“For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.”

This gospel preaching was not a second chance for the unrighteous dead - but a declaration or proclamation of the gospel - an announcement from 2nd person of the Triune Godhead - of the victory that has been secured!

Rev. 1:17b-18

“Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

Having the “keys of Death and Hades” is a way to say the person with the keys - Jesus - has authority over “Death and Hades”.

Illus. - Kim and I have keys to our house - we have authority over who enters our home.

His victory on the cross - and His resurrection - has implications throughout all of creation - not just our personal salvation. The resurrection of Christ transformed everything - both the physical and the spiritual realms!

“Christ, in remaining dead for three days, experienced death as all humans do: His body remained in the grave, and His soul remained in the place of the righteous dead.

He did not suffer there, but, remaining the incarnate Son, proclaimed the victory procured by His penal substitutionary death to all those in the place of the dead - fallen angels, the unrighteous dead, and the O.T. saints.

Christ’s descent is thus primarily the beginning of His exaltation, not a continuation of His humiliation.”

(He Descended to the Dead”, An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday, by Matthew Y. Emerson, p. 103)

Christ went to the cross and was buried - which was part of the eternal plan of God - for God to become human and suffer for us - in our place.

Philippians 2:8-9

“And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name...”

In His descent to the dead, Jesus begins (at the same time) His exaltation - the beginning of His glorification - all while He’s still dead...lying in the tomb...on **Holy Saturday**. Even in death, Jesus is busy securing,

transforming and proclaiming His victory - which is also our victory!

Apply it...

Why does this matter?

Recent deaths in our church:

- Aaron Riddle
- Andy Anderson
- Pastor Len Karlberg

What Jesus did on **Holy Saturday** has a direct connection / blessing to these men - and their families.

As we face death - whether it's our own death - or a loved-one's death - we receive comfort - and we gain confidence - knowing that Jesus experienced death.

His body was laid in the grave.

But death has been declawed and defanged - because Jesus has conquered death - is victorious over sin - and has secured for those who believe in Him an eternity with Him!

When we die - our disembodied soul will be with the glorified Christ who has His resurrected body.

He transformed 'Paradise' - we will be with Him - and His body - His resurrection - is the first fruits of our own future, bodily resurrection.

This is not some abstract - ancient doctrine without meaning for us today - it has great meaning - and great comfort for every one of us - because death is something all of us will experience.

But those with faith in Jesus - who look to Jesus as their Lord and Savior - for the forgiveness of their sins - know that death has been defeated - and they're on the winning side.

Closing prayer

Acts 2:25-28 (quotation of Psalm 16:8-11); **Rom. 10:7**