

Events that Save

I Peter 3: 18-22

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**October 23, AD 2022
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

I love that for the last few years we've brought something from the ancient church into our regular worship. Every time we have communion now, we exchange these words. "Great is the mystery of faith" is followed by "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." We say in one sentence something important from the past: Jesus died. We say something about present reality: Jesus is risen. He's alive right now. We express our confidence about the future: Jesus will return to set all things right. It's the heart of the gospel in ten words.

In worship, we rehearse events from the life of Jesus. That's so crucial to realize. Christianity is not first of all concepts or doctrines, not practical advice or ethical guidelines. It has all of those things. But first of all, Christianity is built on the *events* of Jesus. The things which happened and will happen. I knew we were touching on a deep, primal truth when one communion Sunday after church, a child handed me a drawing. It had a cross and a sunrise. She'd written the words on the side, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." There it is. It's hard for me as a theologian to be able to explain exactly how it all works. But a child can say the basic story. The true story of Jesus. The story we get taken into.

We have an *events-based faith*. That's so often overlooked, yet so very crucial to know. The events of Jesus underlie everything. Timeless principles, spiritual practices, and social reforms are all part of our faith. But they are not primary. They arise from the facts, the historical facts, of the unique, once for all events in the life of Jesus. Christ happened. In the real world. These happenings, these events, of Jesus now change me, propel me, inspire me. We get taken up into those events in a way that makes them the truest thing about our lives. Jesus died, Jesus rose, and I died and rose with him. Jesus will come again and that spurs me on.

Remembering these events will be a huge help as this morning we have before us a notoriously difficult passage. Peter makes an aside to talk about Jesus preaching *in* the spirit to spirits in prison. These spirits disobeyed in the days of Noah when only a few people were saved in the ark through the waters of the Flood. We have a million questions! Was Jesus preaching as a spirit separated

from his body? Or by means of the Holy Spirit who ever inspired him? Were these the spirits of people? Living people in Noah's time? Or the spirits of people who died in the Flood that Jesus preached to later? Or are these evil angelic spirits who worked for our rebellion, held fast in spiritual prisons waiting for judgment? Peter doesn't explain much. He wants to make the connection with Noah and the ark to the experience of baptism into Christ today. He's more interested in how we pass through the waters dying with Christ and rising with him. But I stumble over this preaching in the spirit to other spirits.

Now this is a different kind of sermon because interpreting this text is so tricky that it's perilous to say, "Thus says the Lord. This is the true interpretation of this passage." Peter is talking about something that did not happen in this world, this realm, in which we live. We can only understand the events he talks about by seeing their effects in our world. It's like how we know black holes exist in space. We don't actually see black holes—there's nothing to see. But we know about black holes because we see their gravitational effect on stars that we do see. So this morning, we're going to see how these strange events listed in 1 Peter might fit into the whole story of Jesus and how they may be effecting us.

Let's look for a minute about the events which accomplished our salvation. Every aspect of our being reunited with God is founded on an event in the life of Jesus. The events of Jesus have an effect in our lives. So we can ask the question, "What event accomplished these aspects of our salvation?"

The Event Basis of Salvation

Event :	Effect:
Jesus' Incarnation	Assurance that God is with us
Jesus' Crucified	Atonement of our sin
Jesus' Resurrection	Victory over Death
Jesus' Ascension	Opening of Heaven to believers
Jesus' Return	The restoration of all things

That's the essential story told in five episodes. It's just an expansion to say what is already implied in "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again."

Now, let's look see if Peter tracks with the basic outline of events in the gospel message and their effects on believers.

Verse:	Event:	Effect:
3: 18a	Christ suffered and died	To bring us to God by forgiveness
3: 21	Resurrection	Hope for a good conscience (victory over guilt via Christ's rising)
3: 22	Ascension	Christ reigns over all powers
4: 5	Christ Will Judge	We all must give account.

Peter has four of the five basic events we named. He is assuming the incarnation. So we know that Peter is telling us the essential saving story of Jesus. Now, that puts into perspective the parts that seem strange to us. Into this usual outline, Peter inserts 2 more events of Jesus:

3: 18b	Jesus made alive in the spirit
3: 19	In the spirit, Jesus proclaimed to spirits in prison.

Peter tells us the events, but we don't yet know their effect. Let's see the story, now with 7 events, in Peter's order:

Verse:	Event:	Effect:
3: 18a	Christ suffered and died	To bring us to God by forgiveness
3: 18b	Jesus made alive in the spirit	
3: 19	In the spirit, Jesus proclaimed to spirits in prison.	
3: 21	Resurrection	Hope for a good conscience (victory over guilt via Christ's rising)
3: 22	Ascension	Christ reigns over all powers

4: 5

Christ Will Judge

We all must give account.

In this full outline, the two new events Peter introduces occur *between* Jesus' death and resurrection. That seems really significant to me. If we let narrative be narrative, we get a strong clue as to when and where these mysterious events occurred. After Jesus was put to death in the flesh, he was made alive in the spirit. So his spirit, his soul, was in another realm while his body lay in the tomb. His proclaiming happened *before* his spirit returned to his body and he rose in our world. Sometime after Good Friday, Jesus' spirit was wakened to life from imprisonment in the realm of death. Conscious, his spirit preached to other spirits.

This story flow makes sense to me, even if what this actually looked like still seems mysterious. But there's one more clue Peter gives. One more event. It may or may not be a Jesus-event. But let's try on 4:6:

<u>Vs.</u>	<u>Event</u>	<u>Effect</u>
4: 6	Gospel was preached to the dead	they live in spirit now as God does

Peter writes in the passive voice. The Gospel was preached to the dead. But we don't know who did that preaching. Is that apostles preaching to people who have since died after coming to faith? Or is that Jesus in the realm of the dead? Was Jesus between Good Friday and Easter proclaiming his triumph to those who had died before Jesus came to us as a man?

I think it's impossible to interpret this verse definitively one way or the other. But see what happens if we apply what we have been saying all along. Every aspect of our salvation has an event basis in Jesus. The cross underlies our justification and the experience of forgiveness. The resurrection underlies our experience of new life inside us.

So let's consider an aspect of salvation that has been important to Christ's people since the beginning. Does the salvation Jesus' accomplished apply only to people who lived since Jesus came, or does it apply *backwards in time to those who looked for a redeemer but did not live to see him?* To say it another way, are Abraham and Moses, Eve and Adam also saved by Jesus' death and resurrection? The consistent answer of Christ's people has been Yes. The salvation won by Jesus applies backwards as well as forward to all those who lived by faith in the LORD. So, is there an *event basis* for Jesus' work to get applied to those who died before he came?

From early on, Jesus' descent to the dead has been understood as the event in which those who died in faith before Jesus received the news of the salvation he accomplished. It doesn't take I Peter 3 and 4 to establish that Jesus went to the realm of the dead. In my book on this topic, I only refer a couple of times to this Peter passage. We don't establish the event from these verses alone. But in their context as part of the story of Jesus, they certainly are intriguing. Somehow, some way, the gospel got proclaimed back into the past. We can trust that those who looked to the LORD for salvation rejoiced to hear of Jesus. Beyond that, we cannot reliably go.¹

But now, at last! we can follow Peter where he takes us next. Long ago, the world grew so wicked that the LORD declared that he was grieved that he had made man upon the earth (Gen. 6). He determined to start over. Only Noah was found to be righteous, a man who walked with God. At the LORD's instruction, Noah built an ark for himself, his family and the animals. When the rest of humankind was destroyed in the flood, Noah and his family were brought in the ark safely through the waters. Peter bounces off this story to make a comparison to Jesus and the church. He has just told the story of Jesus. Christ passed through the waters of death on the cross. The flood of divine and human wrath killed him. But then his Father brought him safely through his sojourn among the dead and raised him to new life. Jesus the first of a new humanity, the new Adam, passed through death to life. And just like with Noah, Christ's family gets saved with him. Those joined to Jesus enter the ark.

This being made one with Christ, brought into his family, is symbolized by baptism. Baptism is the outward sign joined to the inner event of coming to faith in Jesus. We get united to him by his Spirit. Going down into the waters is a powerful symbol. We die with Christ who was baptized in blood on the cross. We surrender our lives and wills to him in faith. We die to the old life. Then, we rise made new. We come out of the birth waters of new creation. We are in the ark that is in Jesus. We're under the protection of the one who now reigns over all powers, angels, and authorities in heaven and earth. This has huge implications for how we now live, as we will see next week.

For today, it is enough to know that we who believe in Jesus have been taken into the saving events of his life. To close, I want to go all the way back to the 4th century, to an Egyptian theologian named Macarius. He reflected on how strange seem these events of Jesus' going in spirit to the realm of the dead. But then he added that there's an even stranger, greater surprise that comes from these

events. That's the fact that broken, lost, distorted, venomous sinners like us have come to believe in Jesus and made new. How does that happen? Because Christ Jesus who descended to death for us, keeps doing it. He goes down into the dead hearts and brings us to life. Heart by heart he enters those he saves. Christ has to restore even my ruined capacity to choose him. He has to restore my will in order for my will freely to trust him. So now the triumphant savior does not turn from reaching his holy hands into my sticky guilt. He penetrates the venom sack in my soul and washes it clean with his Spirit. No hell of heart is too stained, too hot, too hard, or too remote for the God who went beyond the ends of the universe of human experience to save us. On this you can rely. On this we must rely, opening our hearts to trust such a savior.

Whatever else I Peter 3 means, that much is clear. Christ died for you. Christ rose for you. Christ will come again for you. Trust him with all your heart.

¹ For those who'd like to consider this topic more deeply, including the theological reasons for my own speculations, please see Gerrit Dawson, *Raising Adam: Why Jesus Descended into Hell*.