

“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.” (1 Peter 3:18–20, ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

There is an old Chinese parable about a poor man who lived with his son in an abandoned fort. One day the horse they owned and depended on to haul vegetables to town—their sole means of support—ran away. When the neighbours heard about it they went to the old man and expressed their sympathy. “Too bad,” they said. “How do you know it’s bad?” the old man responded. “The horse returned and brought back with him a dozen wild horses.” The neighbours said, “This is good!” “How do you know if it’s good?” he asked. “When my son tried to tame the horses he broke his leg.” “Bad,” they said, “very bad.” “How do you know that?” the old man replied. “Shortly afterward a war broke out, but my son was laid up and did not have to go to the front.”

Events by themselves often are looked on as hopeless situations. But no setback, failure, loss, or suffering stands alone. Always there is another chapter to follow. Always there is a final word, and that word is God’s. That is what we learn from Peter when it comes to Christ’s descent into hell.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to look at the 2nd Article of the Apostles’ Creed, specifically focussing on what we refer to as the *Steps of Exaltation*. The Saviour, the Eternal God who humbled Himself to become one with us as He is conceived in human flesh and born of the virgin Mary; who was humiliated by those who mocked and beat and killed Him; who suffered our death and was buried is now revealed as the Victor and Conqueror. He has defeated His enemies and our enemies. Christ humbled Himself, but Paul reminds us: *“Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (Philippians 2:9–11, ESV) The whole host of heaven proclaimed that in our Epistle lesson today as well, and I love the chorus from Handel’s *Messiah*, based on these verses: *“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’”* (Revelation 5:11–13, ESV)

In view of that Chinese parable, we might say, “Jesus died, and that’s sad”, but “He rose, and that’s good!” It is the part in-between that often confuses people, that the risen, living Christ went and preached to the spirits in prison.

Right up front, let’s note that the descent into hell is the first step in Christ’s exaltation. It is not part of His suffering. The Lord’s own words from the cross, *“It is finished”* (John 19:30, ESV) assure us that all that Christ had to endure for us and for our salvation was accomplished. There is no more suffering to endure. It should also be noted that Christ did this after He was made alive; perhaps we should say, more precisely, that His dead body was made alive. At His death, body and soul were separated, just as they are for all of us. Jesus breathed His last, commending His spirit to His heavenly Father. When we die, the spirit or soul leaves the body. The soul of the believer goes to heaven, while the soul of the unbeliever goes to hell—what Peter calls the prison; a prison from which there is no escape. In the meantime, the body is lifeless and lays in the tomb. No matter what happens to this mortal flesh, the day will come when our bodies—these bodies we have right now—will be united with our soul, to live with God in the glory of heaven. Yet they will also be more than a natural body. We will be raised, Paul tells us, with a spiritual body; a glorified body like that in which Christ was raised.

While this glorious day is in the future for us, Christ doesn’t have to wait until judgement day. He promised He would rise on the third day. He declared that He authority to lay down His life, and He had the authority to take it up again. Sometime in that tomb, before the resurrection on Easter morning, the soul that had left the body returned to that body. Peter says that this body, united with the spirit, and alive in the spiritual way in which all will live one day; the whole Christ—body and soul, God and

man—descended into hell.

In that instant, after body and spirit had been united, Christ left the closed tomb. The linen wrappings were suddenly empty and lay flat, the body having miraculously gone out of them. In that instant Christ in his human body and spirit descended to hell and did what Peter relates. We often get caught up in not fully understanding or being able to explain something. Don't worry about it. It doesn't matter that you can't explain it. What matters is what God has clearly said in His inspired Word: Christ *went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison*.

What did He preach? That, too, has been a controversial question. There are those who want Him to preach the Gospel, as if there is a last-ditch effort here to deliver people from hell. The word used for preaching is sometimes used of preaching the Gospel, as when we are told: “[Jesus] *went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*” (Matthew 4:23, ESV) But it also applies to the preaching of the Law. The Spirit reveals that “*John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*” (Matthew 3:1-2, ESV)

Peter compares Jesus' preaching to that of Noah in the days of the flood. Peter is not suggesting that Jesus only preached to those who had been unbelieving in the days of Noah. For 100 years, as he was building the ark, Noah was preaching the law, calling people to repentance, but they did not believe. Peter says it was the same in the days of Christ's earthly ministry and sadly it continues to be true. Here are the people who would not believe when the Word of God was preached to them. But now, as the Exalted Christ; the crucified, yet living One stood before them, they saw to their pain and damnation the just judgement of God, just as the unbelieving world had to acknowledge it when the flood waters began to rise.

The truth of the descent into hell is another assurance for us of the victory of Christ. When a country is conquered, the victors typically advance to the centre of power, or to a symbol that holds meaning to the vanquished, and they show by their presence that they are, indeed, the victors. St. Paul reminds us: “*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*” (Colossians 2:15, ESV) That is really what the descent into hell is about. It is Christ's victory lap. It is His declaration to the whole host of darkness and hell that He has won in the strife. It declares that He is the true God, who has disarmed the powers of darkness. It is exactly as the hymn says: *The foe was triumphant when on Calvary The Lord of creation was nailed to the tree. In Satan's domain did the hosts shout and jeer, For Jesus was slain, whom the evil ones fear. But short was their triumph; the Savior arose, And death, hell, and Satan He vanquished, His foes. The conquering Lord lifts His banner on high; He lives, yes, He lives, and will nevermore die.* (LSB 480)

In a sermon on this text, Luther points to the way this verse was interpreted in art, and said: “However, since we cannot but conceive thoughts and images of what is presented to us in words, and are unable to think of or understand anything without such images, it is appropriate and right that we view it literally, just as it is painted, that He descends with the banner, shattering and destroying the gates of hell; and we should put aside thoughts that are too deep and incomprehensible for us. But we ought . . . simply to fix and fasten our hearts and thoughts on the words of the Creed, which says: 'I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dead, buried, and descended into hell,' that is, in the entire person, God and man with body and soul, undivided, 'born of the Virgin, suffered, died, and buried'.”

That is also what we, as a church, confess through the creed. It is in our Confessions, in the Formula of Concord, where it is stated: “*It is enough if we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell. We will save our questions, <and not curiously investigate> about how this happened until the other world. Then not only this <mystery>, but others also will be revealed that we simply believe here and cannot grasp with our blind reason.* (FC, IX) We may not truly grasp it all in this world, but the day is coming when we will see to our heart's delight, the Exalted Lord, and rejoice in the victory His death and resurrection have accomplished for us—a victory we see in His descent into hell, as He proclaims that victory over all our enemies. Amen.