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HE DESCENDED INTO HELL.
(THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD)
1 Peter 3:18-18-22; Vigil of Easter; April 4, 2026

P Alleluia! Christ is risen!

C He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

We confess in the Apostles' and Athanasian Creeds that Jesus Christ "descended into hell" and "the third day He rose again from the dead." We understand what Jesus' resurrection is. On Easter Sunday, Jesus rose from the dead in His body. The same physical, human body that was conceived in the virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit, lived, suffered, died on the cross, was buried on Good Friday, rested in the tomb on Holy Saturday, the Sabbath Day, rose physically in body and soul victorious over sin, death, and the devil on Easter Sunday.

Sandwiched between "crucified, died, and was buried," and "the third day He rose again from the dead" in the Creed is, "He descended into hell." This raises the question: Is Jesus' descent into hell part of His suffering and death or his resurrection glory? For the answer to this doctrinal question, we turn to God's Word in First Peter three:

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

St. Peter begins this section with a reminder of why Jesus died and rose. **Christ... suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God.** The sinless Son of God died for our sins and rose to bring us into God's family by faith.

Then Peter goes on to describe what “He descended into hell” means when we confess it in the creeds: Jesus was **put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.** Jesus Christ died in His **flesh** on the cross and was buried. At His resurrection He was **“made alive in the spirit.”** The spirit that Jesus gave up at His death He received back when He rose from the dead. The body that was crushed for our iniquities was raised glorious, never to die again. In this glorious body, Jesus **“went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.”** The **“prison”** referred to is hell, and the **“spirits”** in prison are the devil and all his evil angels, as well as the souls of people who have died without faith in God since the beginning of creation.

What did the risen Christ **“proclaim”** to those spirits in prison? Law or gospel?

The devil and his evil angels, the demons, are already condemned to hell forever. They know the gospel of Jesus Christ but have worked to suppress it and keep people from believing it. Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross fulfilled God’s word spoken to the serpent-devil himself in the Garden of Eden after man’s fall into sin. **“He (the Seed-Son of the woman) shall bruise your head (devil), and you (devil) shall bruise His (the Son’s) heel”** (Gn 3:15b). What made the devil think that getting Jesus crucified would stop His saving work? Jesus’ suffering and death crushed the devil’s head. When Jesus had finished His suffering, dying, and rising again to life, He descended in His glorious body to proclaim His victory over those in hell. The law condemned them to hell forever.

The spirits, or souls, of dead humans also in hell heard the same law message proclaimed to the devil and the evil angels. They are in hell because they rejected Jesus as God’s Son and their Savior. They did not trust in Jesus’ suffering and death for the forgiveness of their sins. On the Last Day when Jesus returns visibly to earth in His glorious risen body and raises the dead, those spirits in the prison of hell will have their bodies raised to life along with believers. The difference between the souls in hell and the souls in heaven waiting for that great day is that the bodies and souls of believers will live forever with God in heaven, but the bodies and souls of unbelievers will suffer forever in hell with the devil and the demons separated from the love of God.

What we are confessing with “He descended into hell” is not a continuation of Jesus’ suffering because He had risen from the dead already before descending into hell. And the preaching Jesus did in hell was only law, a confirmation of why those there were condemned to hell: they had rejected the gospel, the good news of God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. There is no greater sin than to reject the gift God’s saving work in Christ in order to keep on sinning in unbelief. And once in hell, there is no getting out. Jesus did not preach the gospel in hell to give people one more chance to repent and believe in Him. That means that Jesus’ descent into hell is a warning to still-living unbelievers. After taking our last breath on this earth and we die, it will be too late to repent and believe in Jesus.

For Christians, Christ’s descent into hell is pure gospel, good news. Like God saved Noah and his family in the ark during the flood, God has brought us into the ark of the Church as His family by faith in His Son, whose blood washed away all our sins in Baptism and will raise us to life with Him. We have renounced the devil, all his works, and all his ways. We confess faith in the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God keeps us safe in the holy ark of the Church; we are not facing eternal death. “He descended into hell” is good news for us because “the third day [Jesus Christ] rose again from the dead.”

In that twilight time after Jesus rose on Easter Sunday and before He appeared alive to the women who came to the empty tomb, “He descended into hell.” His suffering was over, He had risen from the dead, and then He proclaimed victory over sin, death, and the devil. In other words, “He descended into hell.” Amen.

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