

Eric Libby – SDG
2010 Midweek Lenten Series, Sermon #3
Bismarck – March 17th; Jamestown – March 24th
Hymns: 158, 377 (1, 7-9), 145

“We Preach Christ Crucified – No Longer Dead but Alive”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord, Jesus Christ. Our text for this evening is found in the New Testament epistle of Colossians, chapter 2, verses 13-15. Here we read:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Dear Fellow-Redeemed:

For most of us, by far the least familiar Christian teaching mentioned in the Apostles' Creed is that of Christ's descent into hell. With regard to virtually everything else touched upon in the Creed, if we couldn't find biblical language almost exactly mirroring that which is stated in the Creed, we could certainly rather readily find that particular thing taught within the context of Scripture in so many words.

Yes, scrolling down through the items listed in the Apostles' Creed, for the most part, as we've received instruction in Christian teaching, we should pretty easily be able to check these things off as true statements in accordance with Scriptural teaching. But then, again, there's that statement regarding Christ's descent into hell. You won't find any passage in the Bible specifically saying that "Christ descended into hell" following His death upon the cross. So the question becomes, to which Bible passages do we turn to confirm this somewhat mysterious teaching?

Well, on this front, I'll be honest with you, unless I was told about this teaching of Christ's descent into hell before I looked at the supporting passages, I'm not sure how long it would have taken me to see this thing taught in these passages – if I would have ever come to this realization on my own. However, even though this may at first be the case with me or anyone else, one must be careful about then dismissing this teaching as unscriptural just because it is not readily seen or understood by an initial reading and understanding of certain Scriptures.

So, why must one be careful in this regard? – Because this doctrine has been formally confessed by the New Testament Christian church in the Apostle’s Creed (or in a precursor to this creed) since almost the beginning of the New Testament Christian church. Yes, in the Creed, this teaching, together with others, was specifically laid out and confessed by the very early New Testament church in a series of statements that was meant to reflect what the apostles of Christ themselves believed and taught – and we must admit that those early Christian formulators of the Apostles’ Creed were much closer to the source of these things than we ourselves by a long shot. Additionally, as the Lutheran church was being established in conjunction with the events of the Reformation, those early Lutheran confessors reexamined the content of this Creed and officially came to the conclusion that its content is true, including this statement about Christ’s descent into hell, so that it has become an official statement of doctrine according to the historic confessions of the Lutheran church.

So, again, while factors such as these just mentioned can certainly help us come to be better informed with regard to a given doctrine, ultimately, if we ourselves are also going to believe and confess it as true we need to be able to go to the Scriptures themselves to find it taught, don’t we? So then, in this regard, for myself, this is what I will say – that although in looking at certain Scriptures themselves I’m not sure that on my own I would have come to understand Christ’s descent into hell, after hearing the doctrine taught, and after seeing the doctrine pointed to with regard to a couple of Bible passages in particular, frankly, then in reexamining these passages I don’t really know what else could be described in them other than Christ’s descent into hell.

So, with regard to this teaching, probably the foremost portion of Scripture that is pointed to is 1 Peter 3:18-20, which says, **“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, ¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah ...”**. Again, when you really look at what these Bible verses are saying, it’s actually pretty hard to come up with any other kind of valid interpretation of them apart from Christ’s descent into hell. Again, these verses are talking about how after His death Christ went to preach to the spirits in “prison”, but then we know that this was no mere earthly prison, as among those to whom Christ preached were those who lived during the days of Noah already.

Also, concerning Christ’s descent into hell, we teach that Christ did not descend into hell as a part of His sufferings for sin, but rather He did so after His sufferings and work of salvation upon the cross had been completed – rather, we teach that Christ’s descent into hell was a triumphant proclamation of the victory He had accomplished over sin, death, Satan. Just as the ancient Roman Empire army would traditionally orchestrate victory parades through city streets of the places they had newly-conquered, putting on display captured military and

government personal in humiliating fashion before consequently executing them, after His victory gained through the cross, in triumphant fashion Jesus went into the very depths of hell to proclaim this victory over His enemies. He went there to hold a “victory parade”, so to speak, in the presence of His enemies.

And where exactly are these things stated in the Scriptures? – How about in that final verse of our text for this evening, which says of Christ, **“Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [i.e., the cross].”** Again, because through inspiration the Apostle Paul teaches these things as having taken place in connection with the cross of Christ, the logical question becomes, “What else is better described by the things of this Bible verse, then that which would have taken place as Christ descended into hell following His sufferings and death upon the cross?” Honestly, how else can we better understand the things spoken of in verse 15 of our text for this evening?

Of course, establishing that Christ’s descent into hell is a true, historical event has far more value and merit to us than simply establishing something for the sake of history. Establishing the factual basis for Christ’s descent into hell is much more to us than merely the answer to a Bible trivia question. Rather, on par with the Easter morning resurrection, Christ’s triumphant descent into hell is proof of that which Christ accomplished as He went to the cross of Calvary to suffer and die. It is proof that as Jesus did these things He was accomplishing exactly what He said He was going there to accomplish – that is, our eternal salvation.

As has been noted before, if Jesus would have died and stayed dead, with no evidence or testimony that He ever lived or reigned again after His death upon the cross, then how would Jesus’ death have been substantially different than any other human death this world has ever seen? If Jesus would have died and stayed dead like any other person, with no evidence or testimony that He ever lived or reigned again, then how would His death really be of any exceptional personal value to you or me, as far as our eternal futures are concerned?

And yet, throughout His life here in this world, and from the very outset of His passion at the Garden of Gethsemane, it was clear that as Jesus made His way to the death of the cross – and as He suffered and died upon the cross on that first Good Friday – His death would not be like that of any other human being. Again, the Scriptures tell us that His death was truly different because he was no ordinary human being, but in addition to being a true human being, He was also the perfectly sinless Son of God Himself.

Jesus’ life, sufferings and death (and finally His resurrection) were so different because all of these things had been unmistakably foretold in detail by God through the prophets. His death was clearly different, as was evidenced in the Garden of Gethsemane on that night so long ago, in that the only way He could

be physically captured and taken into custody by mere men was as He willfully allowed these things to happen to Him, in obedience with the direction of His Heavenly Father's plan for the way these things should go. Of course, finally, His sufferings and death upon the cross were no ordinary things in that, through miraculous signs and wonders, the earth itself bore witness to the fact that something altogether remarkable was happening at that time. As we think about it, we know that no other person's death here in this world has ever been accompanied by such things – such things so that even the Roman centurion who stood by Jesus' cross at that time could not help but testify, **“Truly this was the Son of God!”** (*Matthew 27:54*)

Again, most of all, it was the fact that death could not contain Him that in the end really tells us that Jesus' death was altogether different from that of ordinary, sinful human beings. The fact that, after dying, death could not contain Jesus tells us that if He has something to say to mankind about these matters, we ought to listen to what He has to say, believing these things to be the truth – especially when the things He tells us are very, very joyous things for sinners such as ourselves, like those things relayed to us through the Apostle Paul by our the words of our sermon text for this evening.

Simply put, as Jesus entered into death, even the death of hell – and as in these things, sin, death and Satan tried to lay hold of Him forever – because of who Jesus is and because of what Jesus was accomplishing by going to the cross to die, in the end, He was finally too powerful for these things and, in effect, He broke the system which could not hold Him.

As an illustration, let me ask you if you have ever made the same mistake I've made before; namely, have you ever allowed too much electrical power to enter into an electrical device so as to effectively fry its components and to render it useless. Now I don't know a lot about these things, but I'm pretty sure I did this very thing with regard to a pretty expensive pair of computer speakers because I got some computer accessories mixed around after a move. What I did was I used the wrong electrical adapter to plug these speakers into an outlet, and as I did this I heard a “pop”, and the speakers didn't work anymore after that. As much as I could figure out, by doing this, I simply let too much power run through the sensitive, internal electrical components of these speakers. As I did so, these parts became overloaded with power, and finally had no choice but to fail and break.

Well, thinking back on this expensive mistake I made makes me think of what happened when Jesus was “plugged into” the circuitry of death, so to speak – even into the full furies and punishments of hell. Finally, as these things raged against Him, they simply could not contain His power and became destroyed in His presence. As such, after all was said and done that first Good Friday, because of the power of God in Jesus, all of sin, death, Satan and hell were now reduced only to a broken system in His presence. After all of the events of the

cross had taken place that first Good Friday, now all of sin, death, Satan and Hell were powerless in Jesus' presence and could only stand by to watch as He victoriously paraded right through their midst, having disarmed them of their power forever.

Again, we speak of such things here this evening, not only because they happened, but because as these things have happened for our benefit also. Again, what our text for this evening tells us is that risen-from-the-dead Jesus has used the power of the cross to forgive our sins and to defeat our spiritual enemies, so as to finally make us alive with Him, just as He lives and reigns in eternal glory. Once again as our text for this evening says, **“And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. ¹⁵ Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.”**

Yes, after Jesus died on the cross, He rose again to life. Before He rose again bodily, He was already made alive in the Spirit so as to descend into hell, thereby to proclaim His victory over all of its forces. As He did these things, these things were done for you and for me – so that believing, we may also have eternal life in His name; so that believing, with Christ, we may also finally reign triumphantly over all of our spiritual enemies. Amen.

(Cong. Rises)

The peace that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.