

1 PETER 3:18-22
CHRIST'S EXALTATION

I believe in Jesus Christ, "He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He will come to judge the living and the dead."

This is the second half of the second article of the Apostles' Creed. This part is known as the exaltation of Jesus. The first half deals with the humiliation of Jesus. If you've ever wondered where we get our Creed from, we get it from the Bible. Our Creed is a clear summary of the Bible. It tells you about the Christian faith. And when you say the Creed you're confessing that you believe this Christian faith.

The second half of our reading from Peter today covers most of the second article of the Creed. So, let's start in verse 18: "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". Jesus suffered death. The Creed says Jesus "suffered under Pontious Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." Peter says why Jesus suffered. He died for sins, our sins, your sins. Jesus suffered so that He might bring you to God.

Have you ever pondered that? We try to do that over Lent, and especially Good Friday. We look at the wrongful arrest, the mock trial, the spitting, the beating, the whipping, the crucifixion, but now it's Easter, and people want to look at the joyful side of things, the resurrection. Some people even tell me that they don't come to church over Lent because they don't like those gloomy depressing things.

And yet here it is springing up in our Easter text. Gloom at it's greatest. Here we acknowledge that we do sin. We have an evil problem that we can't deal with. If we could deal with our sins on our terms such as by doing some sort of good deed, or making some sort of payment to the church, and thus to God, people would be lining up to make their sins or guilt go away, but to hear of Jesus' bloody death to pay for our sins makes some people feel guilty instead of taking away their guilt. To them it's not – Jesus died for me – but rather Jesus died because of me.

Both are true, but to dwell on the second isn't so uplifting. Jesus died because we're sinners, corrupted by original sin, and no matter how hard we try, we can't stop sinning. We have to acknowledge that. It's only when we acknowledge our deeply corrupted sinful nature that hearing that Jesus died for us becomes deeply meaningful to us. Someone died for you, on your behalf, in your place, because you needed Him to do that for you. Yes, our situation is critical, but the solution, the death of the Son of God is greater.

Jesus did this once for all. Peter doesn't say for all, but this is said three times in Hebrews (7:27, 9:12, 10:10), once in Romans (6:10), and once in the book of Jude (1:3). From the cross Jesus said it is finished (John 19:30). Another sacrifice doesn't need to be made for your sins. Jesus' sacrifice covers all sins, of all people, of all time.

Then Peter says the righteous for the unrighteous, showing us the great substitution and glorious exchange that took place on the cross. On the cross God loaded all of our unrighteousness upon Jesus, and through Baptism God gives us the righteousness of Jesus, which Peter will get to three verses later.

Why did Jesus do this? Peter tells us plainly that this was done so that we might be brought to God, and we all cheer that we have a way to get to heaven, but I want to stop you there, as our Creed does, and as our reading does, as both go onto something we often skip over, and rarely ponder.

Jesus descended into hell. Jesus went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison. What does that mean? The simple answer is that we don't really know much about this. The Bible doesn't tell us much, and in that case it's best to limit our discussion and not speculate. Luther said that "after the burial the entire person, God and man, descended into hell, conquered the devil, destroyed hell's power, and took from the devil all his might."

Our teachings in the Formula of Concord say that we are not to concern ourselves and speculate how this happened. Our reason and senses cannot comprehend this. We must only believe and cling to the Word of God. When we do this we'll be comforted that neither hell, nor the devil can take us or any believer in Christ captive or harm us. It's enough to know that Christ went to hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and has redeemed them from the power of death, of the devil, and of eternal damnation.

This is a great Lutheran practice when it comes to teaching the Word of God. Sometimes we have to say, "We don't know", or "We don't know much", and leave it at that. The Small Catechism used for teaching confirmation says, "The Scriptures teach that Christ, after He was made alive in the grave, descended into hell, not to suffer punishment, but to proclaim His victory over His enemies in hell." Then it quotes our text and Colossians 2:15, "[God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in [Jesus]."

What we're confessing and being told in the Creed, and in our text is that Jesus is heralding the power of His resurrection over all the forces of the world. This descent into hell is the start of Jesus' exaltation, and then comes the resurrection, which is what Peter also gets to in verse 21 along with Baptism.

Here Peter connects Baptism with salvation and the resurrection. After the Creed tells us that Jesus descended into hell it tells us that on “The third day He rose again from the dead.” So, let’s think about this.

Jesus has descended into hell and is proclaiming His victory to the spirits in hell among which Peter includes those who died in the days of Noah and the great flood that covered the entire earth. In those days Peter says that only eight people survived, brought safely through water.

Peter then clearly tells us that Baptism corresponds to that flood in the days of Noah. The waters of Baptism parallel the waters of the flood and these baptismal waters save people. To which many people ask how simple water in the baptismal font could save anyone. ‘Are we not just making our promise to God?’ And here again people are trying to earn their salvation, denying the mysteries of God.

Peter refutes that and says that salvation comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our Baptism appeals to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You appeal to God for a good conscience that all of your unrighteousness went to Jesus and all of Jesus’ righteousness went to you through your Baptism.

The death of Jesus pays for all of your sins, and the resurrection of Jesus wins for you eternal life. And in the middle there’s God baptizing you, joining you to Jesus’ death and resurrection. This hope of salvation through Jesus’ death and resurrection, through Baptism, is denied by many Christians so that we have to repeatedly return to the Scriptures and ask you the questions Paul asked, and give you the answers Paul gave.

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ... For the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:3-11).

Peter goes on with this pre-creed text with Jesus ascending into heaven to the right hand of God, which we celebrate on this Thursday, but we’ll end here with Jesus’ resurrection bringing us to God in heaven. Amen.