

April 3, 2021
Holy Saturday
Homily Manuscript

What Was Jesus Doing While Dead? (1 Pet 3:18-4:8, Isa 38:9-20, Lk 16:19-31)

This morning, while it may sound strange to say, I want to consider what Jesus was doing on the Saturday morning of the original holy Week, the day after he died and was buried. For Jews, this was the sabbath, and so as our opening collect noted Jesus' body was sabbathing, was resting. Granted, it was in a tomb, but his body was resting nonetheless. However, while his body lay still, there was quite a bit that Jesus was up to in the spiritual realm. In the Apostles' Creed we affirm that after Jesus was "crucified, died, and was buried," "He descended to the dead." But are we quite sure what that means? Perhaps not entirely, and this may be because even though there are actually a surprising number of passages where Jesus' descent is referenced, these scriptures are not nearly as clear on what precisely descent entailed as they are about the meaning of Jesus' death & resurrection. So this may be why Holy Saturday gets much less attention than marking Jesus' death on Good Friday and celebrating His resurrection on Easter Sunday.

So this morning I want to explore what we *can* deduce from scripture and theology about what Jesus descending to the dead did entail. So, what he was doing, and why it matters for us and may deserve more attention than it tends to receive. And to do this I want to share from the work of biblical scholar Matthew Y. Emerson, whose thorough research and extensive thought on Jesus' descent is presented in his book on the subject,¹ which the Lord recently put across my path.

Perhaps one reason we tend to have a more ambiguous understanding of Jesus' descent than either his death or resurrection is because the scriptures are not nearly as clear on what the descent means, despite there being a surprising number of passages that refer to it. #

Now, while we recite that Jesus descended to the dead in the Apostles' Creed, some of you may have been exposed to a version of the Creed that instead affirms that Jesus "descended into hell". In fact, this is what we recited in the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) my family attended when I was an adolescent. Without getting into the weeds too much, translating the Creed's Latin to say "hell" was an innovation that didn't emerge until the Reformation and that originated with John Calvin.² For the millennium or so prior to then, the Church took this line of the Creed to mean "descended to the dead".

But if Jesus "descended to the dead", still, what does that mean? Well answer that we need to have a basic understanding of ancient cosmology; that is, how the biblical writers' would've understood the structure of the universe. In your bulletin or on the screen I've included a diagram from Emerson's book, which illustrates the ancient belief that the universe was divided into three-tiers.

¹ Matthew Y. Emerson, "He Descended to the Dead": An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday, IVP: 2019.

² Emerson explains how this was an overcorrection against the Roman Catholic position on the descent, which of course included Purgatory/



From the beginning of the Old Testament - like even in Genesis 1 - we see that the Ancients believed there was earth, and then above the earth was heaven, where God was, beyond the sun and blue of the sky (which they actually thought was a hard firmament, and below the earth was the underworld, or Sheol, which was thought of as a dark shadowy place where the disembodied spirits or souls of “the dead” went. And while there was no sense of it being what we would think of as Hell - there was no notion of there being any torment in Sheol - it was still not where anyone wanted to be, because in Sheol one was *incapable* of enjoying the Promised Land or life with God. And we can see this reflected in the words of Hezekiah³ found in our Isaiah passage today. His words in verse 18 highlight how being without their bodies, the dead in Sheol were unable to praise God. But beside Sheol being a place one wanted to avoid,

But the common reading of the Old Testament is that it has little interest in Sheol, apart from making clear that Sheol was not a desirable place, or any afterlife whatsoever, because the focus of the Old Testament is all on life in the Promised Land. However, in the Prophets we do begin to see a shift from the view that the dead remain dead to expressions of hope in a resurrection of Israel as a people,⁴ including at least one reference to the resurrection of individual bodies.⁵ But it’s important to keep in mind that the final book of the Old Testament was written no later than the fifth century B.C. after the temple in Jerusalem has just been rebuilt. So more than 500 years passed between the end of the Old Testament and when the first New Testament text was written. And it just so happens that during that period of time (which we call the Second Temple Period) there is a whole lot of development in the way people viewed the afterlife both in pagan culture and Judaism. And the most significant development in this regard within Judaism was the development of the view that Sheol - the place of the dead - was compartmentalized between the righteous and the unrighteous, and each of those places including a foretaste of their eternal fate, whether punishment or reward.

There may not have been canonical scriptures written during this time - that is, scriptures that are viewed by the Church as authoritative and therefore included in the Bible - but there was still a whole lot

³ King of Judah in 88-7 c BC

⁴ Emerson cites Ezekiel 36-37

⁵ Daniel 12:1-2 - ““At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. 2 And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt

of (what we call “extra-biblical”) scripture written, which give us a pretty clear understanding of how the Jewish concept of the afterlife had progressed since the Old Testament and what it had developed into by the time of Jesus. And Emerson suggests that the prevalence of this view that the place of the dead was divided between the righteous and the unrighteous is what allows Jesus to tell a parable like the Rich Man & Lazarus.⁶



So, as you can see from the second diagram I’ve included in your bulletin or on the screen, by the first century the place of the unrighteous dead was most commonly referred to as Hades; and within Judaism Sheol had also come to be associated with this compartment in particular.

- Then Gehenna, if you find the word “Hell” in your New Testament that is most often the Greek word “Gehenna”. Gehenna and Tartarus - typically translated as “Hell” in the New Testament - are both almost always associated with torment. Gehenna being where the unrighteous souls are and Tartarus being a sort of prison for fallen angels, as described with more detail in 2 Peter 2, which says, “**4** God didn’t spare the angels when they sinned but cast them into the lowest level of the underworld and committed them to chains of darkness, keeping them there until the judgment.”²
- Meanwhile, the place of the righteous dead is where the souls of the faithful Jews, like Abraham, were thought to be. Thus, in Luke 16 it is referred to as “Abraham’s bosom” or “Abraham’s side”.

And with all of these compartments being part of the place of the dead, despite being separated, there was some sense that communication between the compartments was possible, as the Luke 16 reflects with the communication between the rich man and Lazarus. And this would allow us to understand 1 Peter’s claim in 1 Peter 3:19, that Jesus preached to the spirits imprisoned in Tartarus, to be understood as something Jesus did from the righteous compartment (without actually being in Tartarus himself). #

Now, as Emerson clarifies, even though we may not share the ancient cosmology of believing that the place of the dead is somehow inside the earth’s core, or that heaven is somehow above the sky, doesn’t make these places any less real.⁷ The spatial terminology of the descent is metaphorical. Or as Luther made clear, it is a spiritual descent. Therefore, what the doctrine of the descent is affirming that after death humans enter into an intermediate state prior to the final judgment. That is, a non-physical realm, an invisible, spiritual realm, in which human souls dwell, a state where creatures like angels exist

⁶ ...even if it's just a parable and therefore not sufficient in itself to develop a doctrine of the afterlife.

During the Second Temple period a Genre of literature arose in both Jewish and non-Jewish literature of tours of Hades. Emerson contends the parable of the rich man and Lazarus follows the form of this genre.

⁷ Emerson: “Just because this spiritual realm is not geographically locatable does not mean it is any less real than Jerusalem or Rome.”

all the time. And though we cannot empirically experience this realm during our life on earth, the inhabitants of this state - at least the angels and God - can show themselves to us.

So if Jesus was fully human (and has a soul) and died as we all do, then while his body was buried, descent to the dead is what happened to his soul. However, Emerson wants to emphasize that as the only sinless human being ever, Jesus would have certainly descended into the righteous compartment. And this is where the correct translation of that line of the Apostles' Creed as "he descended to the dead", not "he descended into hell" becomes important. If Jesus had descended into *hell* or *gehenna* - whatever you want to call it - this could indicate that the soul of Jesus suffered spiritual torment during his descent. And Emerson says this is problematic because it would mean the work of the cross was insufficient, incomplete, that the job really wasn't "finished" as Jesus had said in His final breaths. Instead, in light of this, we should think about Jesus' descent as the beginning of his **victory parade**.

But what victory did Jesus have to show yet, if he had only died and not yet risen? Well, the victory was that even in his descent, Jesus remained not only fully human but also fully God, which means that God had shown up in Sheol. Until then, over all of the compartments of Sheol or Hades - whatever you wanna call it, death reigned,⁸ and it let no one out. But when God shows up there by His Son, he seizes control and will henceforth make the calls on releasing people from the realm of death. As He says to John in Revelation 1, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, **18** and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Hades. "

Then finally, returning to our 1 Peter passage, in chapter 4 Peter described what Jesus does for the faithful Jews with him in the righteous compartment (Abraham among them, of course). In 4:6 he writes, "⁶ For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does." He proclaims his victory to them as well. And His presence releases the Old Testament saints from the chains of death and thereby turns Abraham's bosom into paradise. And no doubt, it did that for the repentant thief who'd been next to him on the cross, to whom he'd said "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."⁹ And after His resurrection & Ascension, these same saints would be taken with Jesus into heaven - if you care to distinguish paradise from heaven - where all of us who die in the Lord will be as well - in an intermediate, disembodied state - until Jesus returns and our bodies are raised and we dwell with him here in the new heavens and the new earth.

And so, what a comfort this day should be. For on the Saturday of the original Holy Week, Christ's victory had begun. His descent certainly means victory for us!

Through baptism - the descent into water - we are united to Jesus' own descent, defeating death for us. His descent also means that in holy communion we are spiritually united not just to one another, but to those who are "absent from the body but present with the lord."¹⁰ That should give Holy Communion new meaning for many of us! And finally, Jesus' descent means that death - both our own and that of our loved ones - death is not the final word for those who die in the Lord, just as it wasn't for Him.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁸ Bass (via Emerson) "suggests that Death should therefore be seen as the ruler of the realm, Hades.

As Bauckham s, "Revelation 1:18 . . . presupposes that the gates of Hades, which release none who has entered them, have been for the first time opened for a man to leave. The divine prerogativ...

⁹ Luke 23:43

¹⁰ 2 Cor 5:8