

March 30

Holy Saturday

The Mystery of the Visit to Hell on Easter Weekend

“And Simon Peter answered and said, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered and said to him... Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not overpower it.” (Matthew 16:16, 17a, 18b)

In the Apostles Creed we confess: ***“I believe in Jesus Christ... Who was... crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead...”***

The descent into hell is a curious journey. Certainly we believe that Jesus did not go there to suffer. When he said, ***“It is finished...”*** His suffering concluded. Recall that He said to the thief who confessed faith in Christ, ***“Today you shall be with me in paradise.”*** (Luke 23:43)

I learned recently that the Russian Orthodox believe that Jesus descended at the moment that He died, hence the resurrection of the Saints upon His death (Matthew 27:51 – 53). But I’m also reminded that Elisha’s very dead bones buried in a shallow grave resurrected a man slain in battle (II Kings 13:21). My former pastor would remind us, “Jesus had to be the *Greater Than* – all the prophets...” - so His death raised many to life).

God has not answered this question specifically regarding the timing or the manner of Jesus descent into hell. The Lutherans in their Confessions kept it quite simple: ***“For in this [Confession] the burial and descent of Christ to hell are distinguished as different articles; and we simply believe that the entire person, God and man, after the burial descended into hell, conquered the devil, destroyed the power of hell, and took from the devil all his might. We should not, however, trouble ourselves with high and acute thoughts as to how this occurred...”*** (Formula of Concord Solid Declaration Article IX)

Do you remember the curious story of Samson, the strong man? Samson was hardly like Christ in his behavior and dignity – but he was certainly like Christ as a picture of strength. His enemies were waiting for him in the city of Gaza... At night Samson arose went to the gates of the city, picked them up put them on his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of a mountain... Which by the way was about 30 miles east. They remained there as a monument to his strength, and the relative weakness and vulnerability of any protection that the people of that city – or any other city had against God.

Jesus also described Himself as a “strong man.” (Matthew 12:29) This was right after Jesus cast out demons, and was accused of being in allegiance with the demons. When Jesus cast out demons, and later when Jesus told Peter the gates of hell would not prevail against him and His Word... He had essentially already put Satan on notice. Hell’s kingdom was coming to an end. And when He visited hell sometime that holy weekend... The stone that was rolled away was a gate that would stand as a reminder... Satan lost, he was weaker, God’s grace and love was stronger. Life would conquer death!

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of life, our strong man in every circumstance. Come to our aid when we are assaulted by sin, with your powerful blood in grace. Strengthen our faith that we might trust in you and keep in step with your Holy Spirit. And when the shadow of death comes cast fear away by the light of Your life! We praise You for being our strong man!*