

5. He descended into hell; on the third day he rose again

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 6 November 2022, 21st Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 16; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Matthew 27:50-28:10

The reality of death

Some years ago I was invited to speak to some year 9 students about death at a tour of Cornelian Bay cemetery. The old language for my job as a Anglican minister is “a cure of souls”. Preparing for the talk I realised that at heart, my job as a cure of souls is to help people, to help you, make your peace with God and with your neighbour before you die. Now you and I may have plenty of living left before that day, and a life lived in peace with God and neighbour is a beautiful and powerful thing. But the reality is that each and every one of us will die. You, your parents, your children, your friends, your colleagues, their friends, their families, everyone will die. The question is are you ready for it? How will you face it? What is your hope in the face of death?

Western culture is by and large embarrassed by death. We don't know what to do with it. We push reminders of death to the periphery of our vision. We bundle the very old into nursing homes. We try to hide death's inevitable approach through makeup and plastic surgery. We distract ourselves with parties and holidays and entertainment. But the teacher in Ecclesiastes reminds us,

It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of everyone;
the living should take this to heart.¹

We used to believe the Christian story about life and death, and so the Christians rituals around death made sense. But no longer. Now, the baseline view is Naturalism, that is to say that matter is all there is. There is no heaven, no hell, no afterlife. When you die you cease to exist. Your body decomposes. An Epicurean inscription from ancient Roman graves captures how we think about death well: “I was not. I was. I am not. I am not. I care not.” And yet, every funeral that I've conducted and every funeral that I've attended, tells me that people don't really believe that death is the end and we're food for worms. Even stripped of any content from any faith tradition, people still express the desire that somehow, there is something beyond the grave. That somehow we continue.

¹ Ecclesiastes 7:22

The philosopher Peter Kreeft says that to tell people they must accept death as just another stage of growth is like telling a quadriplegic that paralysis is another stage of exercise.² We tell ourselves that death is natural. But we don't believe it. The fact is we're embarrassed about death because we're terrified. Carl Jung writes, "Death is indeed a fearful piece of brutality: there is no sense pretending otherwise."³

The fear of death

Why do we fear death? Let me suggest 3 reasons.

First, because we just don't know what lies on the other side. The "death is natural" approach might say there is nothing, but that cannot be proven. Epicurus wrote, "What men fear is not the fact that death is annihilation, but that it is not."⁴ We are afraid of what we don't know and death is the ultimate unknown.

On top of this fear is a second, we're afraid of judgement. I have a little confession: I'm a Taylor Swift fan. In the revenge fantasy song in her latest album she sings, "Karma's on your scent like a bounty hunter / karma's going to track you down." Back in the 90s Savage Garden sang, "I believe in karma / what you give is what you get." The question is, will our good deeds outweigh our bad? If there is something after death, we want it to be good, and not bad. And if there is reward or punishment, the question becomes have we done enough? Facing death we can be filled with regret and terrified because we can't put right what we've done wrong.

The third reason we're afraid of death, and perhaps the biggest is that we're afraid of being abandoned. We're not made to be alone. In his book on the Apostle's Creed, Pope Benedict makes this point with 2 illustrations. First, a child walking alone in the woods is terrified. No amount of rational argument will drive away his fear. Only when he is taken by the hand and hears the love of another human being will he lose his fear. The second example is the person left to keep watch alone with a dead body. Rationally she knows that the corpse cannot harm her, and yet she is afraid. Benedict suggests that this fear is of being alone with death, which is the uneasiness and vulnerability of our own nature. This fear cannot be overcome by reason, but only by the presence of someone who loves her. Our fear of death is that it is a state of abandonment so deep that the presence of love could not penetrate it, that we would be utterly, dreadfully alone. He writes, "In truth - one thing is certain: there exists a night

² Quoted in Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2016: 161

³ Ibid 162.

⁴ Ibid 162.

into whose solitude no voice reaches; there is a door through which we can only walk alone - the door of death.”⁵

He descended into hell

It is into this situation that Jesus steps. In Hebrews 2 we read that the eternal Son of God shared in our humanity “so that by his death ... he might free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”⁶ Today we’re looking at the lines of the creed, *he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead.*

These days we usually say he descended to the dead, but the older translation of the creed read “hell”. Usually when we think of “hell” we think of something like the fires of hell, something akin to the lake of fire, the second death which Revelation speaks about.⁷ But this is not what this article in the creed is talking about. Hell is just the Anglo-Saxon word for the realm of the dead, equivalent to the Greek word Hades and the Hebrew Sheol. In ancient cosmology there is a 3 tier reality - heaven, where God lives; earth, where we live; and under the earth, hades, sheol, where the dead live, hell.

In the person of Jesus, God has united himself with human nature. He has touched the very limits of our nature from conception through to death itself, to sanctify us and unite us to God. Different New Testament writers speak of Jesus' death as a descent into the realm of the dead. Ephesians says he descended to “the lower earthly regions”.⁸ In the text we read earlier, Peter says,

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. **19** in which also, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits...

After his resurrection he went “into heaven and is at the right hand of God.”⁹

I have to say that until preparing this sermon, I had not really understood what this text in Peter meant. I don't claim to have a full grasp on it, but reading for this sermon has been very helpful. You may have asked the question what Jesus was doing on the Saturday between his crucifixion on Friday and his resurrection on Sunday. Peter tells us - he was in the realm of the dead, proclaiming the Gospel. There is no part of all creation that has not heard his voice.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius, 2004: 298-301

⁶ Hebrews 2.14-15

⁷ Revelation 20.14-15

⁸ Ephesians 4.9

⁹ 1 peter 18-19, 22

Theologian Ben Myers writes:

“The Son of God has taken our nature to himself. He allows our fallen nature to drag him down. He descends to the very abyss of the human condition. ... Because he shares our nature he is able to fall with us into death; because he is the Son of God he is able to fill death with his presence so that the grave becomes a source of life.”¹⁰

Eastern Orthodox iconography focuses on this aspect of Christian hope. In Orthodoxy the icon of the resurrection has a glorified Christ, standing over the broken doors of hell. The chains and locks which held the dead are broken. He grasps Adam and Eve, representing redeemed humanity, by their wrists to raise them from the underworld. This is that great Anglo-Saxon phrase, the harrowing of hell.¹¹ The strange account of Matthew’s Gospel speaks of this. At Jesus’ death,

The earth shook, the rocks split **52** and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. **53** They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.¹²

Benedict sums up:

“This article asserts that Christ strode through the gate of our final loneliness, that in his Passion he went down into the abyss of our abandonment. Where no voice can reach us any longer, there he is. Hell has been overcome, or, to be more accurate, death, which was previously hell [as utter abandonment from God], is hell no longer.”¹³

If you don’t sense just what good news this is for us, you must be asleep. This means that death no longer need be a terror for us. There is no place that we can go where Christ is not, not even death. He is our champion, who has defeated death, broken its chains and freed us from its power. For those in Christ, Death is transformed to the gateway to life. Life itself is transformed. Instead of moving from birth to death, we move from death to life. The marker for the start of the Christian’s life is baptism in which we are united to Christ’s death. The end of our lives becomes the moment through which we are born into the life of the resurrection. The closer we come to our death, the more our life ebbs away, the more the glory that awaits us shines on our faces. But I’m getting ahead of myself. We’ll look at more of that in coming weeks.

¹⁰ Ben Myers, *The Apostle’s Creed*, Lexham Press: 80-82

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Matthew 27.51-53

¹³ Benedict, *Introduction to Christianity*, 301

We come now to that next line in the creed: **On the third day he rose again from the dead.**

I've spent more time on Jesus' descent into hell because it is not so familiar to us. There is so much we could say about Jesus' resurrection, and funnily enough we preach on it each Easter. I have spoken about the meaning of Jesus' descent into hell, but, for those who witnessed Jesus' death, this was in fact hidden from view.

In Western culture we often draw a very strong distinction between science and religion, facts and values, history and mythology, reason and faith, public and private.¹⁴ You might say that most of what we've been saying today lies in the realm of mythology, and that there is a short step from this to fiction, as opposed to the truths of reason and history. The resurrection of Jesus however crosses these binaries and shows them to be reductive. Christians believe Jesus' resurrection is true, that it really happened nearly 2000 years ago just outside the walls of Jerusalem, and also that it means an awful lot. So much so that it in fact breaks the bounds of those binaries and recalibrates how we see everything.

What are some of the reasons for believing that Jesus' resurrection actually happened, in the flesh, bodily alive after having died? First, this is not a scientific claim, in the sense that you could recreate this in the laboratory. It's a historical claim, that is a once off event. As such we look at historical evidence, primarily texts from the ancient world, ideally, as close to the events as we can get, eyewitnesses if possible, similar to a court of law. That is what we find in the 4 Gospels. If you want a full account of this, Richard Baukham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* is excellent. So what do these early accounts say?

First, the claim that Jesus rose from the dead is a public claim. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that Christ

... was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to [Peter], and then to the Twelve. **6** After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, **8** and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

Paul here is saying, Jesus' resurrection was not some private spiritual vision or hallucination. Lots of people saw him, independent of each other. Paul's first readers could have gone and fact checked with them. The Gospels were written 30-60 years after the events they recount. But Paul wrote his letters between AD 49-64. So this account we just read is from within 20 years of Jesus' death and resurrection.¹⁵ In addition to the Gospels and Paul's letters, the

¹⁴ Cf. Rory Shiner and Peter Orr, *The World Next Door*, Matthias Media, 2021:83

¹⁵ *Ibid* 86

other documents of the New Testament speak of Jesus' resurrection. In terms of evidence from the ancient world this is pretty good - multiple sources, written close to the events they describe, traced to eyewitnesses, some clearly independent of others. There's lots more that could be said on this point, and I've got an article up the back by Tom Wright, one of the world's leading scholars on Jesus' resurrection that I'd commend to your reading.¹⁶

But the biggest problem we have with Jesus' resurrection is not evidence. It's that we know that it's impossible, and that there must be a natural explanation for the historical evidence. When I say we know, what I mean is that the underlying assumptions of our culture is that the material world is all there is and that science is the only way to know things. But neither of these assumptions can be proved by science. And I would argue that if the evidence doesn't fit the theory, then the problem is not the evidence, it's the theory. If the historical evidence points to the fact that Jesus really did rise from the dead, then that will change how we see reality. It will mean that God has in fact touched the world. That love has penetrated even the grave.

Let's just stay with that for a moment. What does Jesus' resurrection mean?¹⁷

It means that Jesus is alive. And if he is alive we can know him. It means that the extraordinary claims he made about himself are true. Not least his authority. In John's Gospel Jesus says, "as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge..."¹⁸ If Jesus has the authority over life and death, then he has authority over your life and my life.

It means that his work on the cross is finished. His resurrection is his vindication.

It means that there is hope and a future, for us and for the rest of creation. Paul speaks of Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits of the new creation - the foretaste and guarantee of what is to come.¹⁹

It means that God so values his creation and human life that he will bring it through death into his eternal life, because he has done this in Jesus' own body. It means we no longer live lives captive to the fear of death, seeking to wrest what pleasure we can by whatever means we can before our miserable lives are over. We are freed to live the lives of love for which God made us.

Are you afraid of death? Your only hope in life and death is Christ. There is no darkness his light does not penetrate. He is your champion who has defeated death and broken open her

¹⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/can-we-believe-in-the-resurrection/10101522>

¹⁷ The following list is adapted from *The World Next Door*, 89-90

¹⁸ John 5.26-27

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:20-23

gates. He will carry you through to life immortal if only you would trust him. He descended to hell and on the third day he rose again from the dead. Amen! Hallelujah!