

He Descended to the Dead
Matthew 27:55-66; 1 Peter 3:18-19

This morning we want to ponder the burial of Jesus, and his descent to the dead.

We call it **Holy Saturday**, and indeed it is day of holy remembrance.

But we could also call it **Hopeful Saturday** because I believe Jesus' descent to the grave/dead gives hope to believers.

It gives hope to our loved ones who are dying.
It gives us a word of comfort to give to those who are dying.

The burial of Jesus is not to be overlooked, as Paul says...

1 Corinthians 15:

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

It is the Burial of Jesus that we read about in

Matthew 27:55-66

⁵⁵ There were also many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him, ⁵⁶ among whom were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

⁵⁷ When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. ⁵⁸ He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. ⁵⁹ And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud ⁶⁰ and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

⁶² The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate ⁶³ and said, "Sir, we remember how that impostor said, while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise.' ⁶⁴ Therefore order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last fraud will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers. Go, make it as secure as you can." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard.

I want to consider three points today regarding Holy Saturday.

- 1. The Fulfillment of Scripture**
- 2. The Descent to the Dead/Grave**
- 3. The Implications**

The Fulfillment of Scripture:
His Body Buried in the Grave of the Rich Man (27:55-66)

A. Meet the Women

55-57: the women who witness the crucifixion and resurrection.

- **Mary Magdalene** was devoted to Jesus,
- Another **Mary**, this one *the mother of James and Joseph* but unfortunately we have no other information about her or her sons.
- **The mother of Zebedee's sons** has appeared before in this Gospel, making that famous request to Jesus (Matt 20:20–21).
- **Despite her lack of awareness of what kind of King Jesus was, she was an important figure, and like the rest of these ladies remained devoted to Jesus.**
- These women were faithful to the end and watched the last moments of their Lord.
- Women really shine in the crucifixion, burial, resurrection account.
- Praise God for godly women who love Jesus and his people.

B. Meet Joseph of Arimathea (27:57-61)

- Matthew prepares us for the triumphant resurrection account by describing the burial of Jesus.
- Joseph asks Pilate for the body of Jesus and then puts him in his own tomb.
- This was remarkable in many ways.
 1. **A rock tomb was expensive, and it was not permitted to bury a criminal in a family grave.**
 2. John adds that **Nicodemus** was also there, and that a remarkable amount of spices were used, reminiscent of the massive amount of wine at the wedding (Jn 19:40)
 3. These spices are symbol of honor.
 4. Jesus is given the burial of a king.
 5. In a tomb of honor; it has never been used (41); near the crucifixion (42)

C. The Fulfillment of Scripture

Neither Matthew nor John doesn't state it, but this burial fulfills Scripture.

"And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death." (Isa 53:9).

- He was assigned a grave with the wicked (the two men beside him), but what happened?
- **After crucifixion, the final act of degradation was to throw the body into a common grave.** The last great indignity.
- Jesus and the thieves were given their assignments
- But Joseph asks for the body and it turns out that Jesus is given a rich man's tomb instead.
- **Amazingly, Pilate grants Joseph's request.**
- God used it to fulfill prophecy
- **God's meticulous sovereignty on display**
- Jesus is given a new tomb, though assigned a common one.
- It was an **identifiable tomb**, also.

Holy Saturday shows us that Jesus really died.

Holy Saturday shows us that God is sovereign.

Holy Saturday shows us that God keeps his word.

The Descent to the Dead (1 Peter 3:18-19; and Other Texts)

There was a resting aspect to Jesus being in the tomb, for sure, but for centuries there has been a question of whether or not there was more going on, namely the proclamation of victory to the dead.

The mystery of Holy Saturday is this: **After Jesus died on the cross and his body was buried in the tomb, where was he?**

The Creed says he descended to the **grave/dead/hell**.

- I would argue (though this point is debated) that “**hell**” is **not** a good option because it is used to mean **the torment of the unrighteous dead** and that’s not my position.
- I **do not** believe that Jesus experienced further torment in hell.

We have historically said both “**grave**” (which is uncontested; he was buried in a grave) and early on we said “**dead**” IDC.

I’m good with both.

After reading Matthew Emerson’s book, I believe “**dead**” **captures more of the significance of Jesus’ time between the crucifixion and resurrection**, though “grave” is certainly true!

Let me explain.

Jesus’ body was buried but his soul departed to the place of the dead.

- Recall, “To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Cor 5:8)
- We are more than a body.
- Our soul/spirit goes to be with the Lord.
- Likewise, Jesus’ descended to the place of the dead, **with his body being in the grave, and his soul/spirit to the place of the righteous dead.**
- I believe further that Jesus could communicate with all the dead – the righteous dead, the unrighteous dead in hades/sheol/Gehenna, and fallen angels.

Matthew Emerson:

“Christ died and experienced death as all humans do: his body was buried, and his human soul went (“descended”) to the place of the dead. He descended to the righteous compartment of the dead (“paradise”), but he could communicate with all the dead. In this way, he proclaims victory to those “under the earth” (Phil 2:10).

This may seem really strange if you’re not a Christian, or something like you’d find in the show *Stranger Things* as Will is in the Upside Down world, or something out of the *Lord of the Rings*.

But there is biblical and historical justification for this view.

The questions are (1) **where did he descend to exactly?** and (2) **what did he do?**

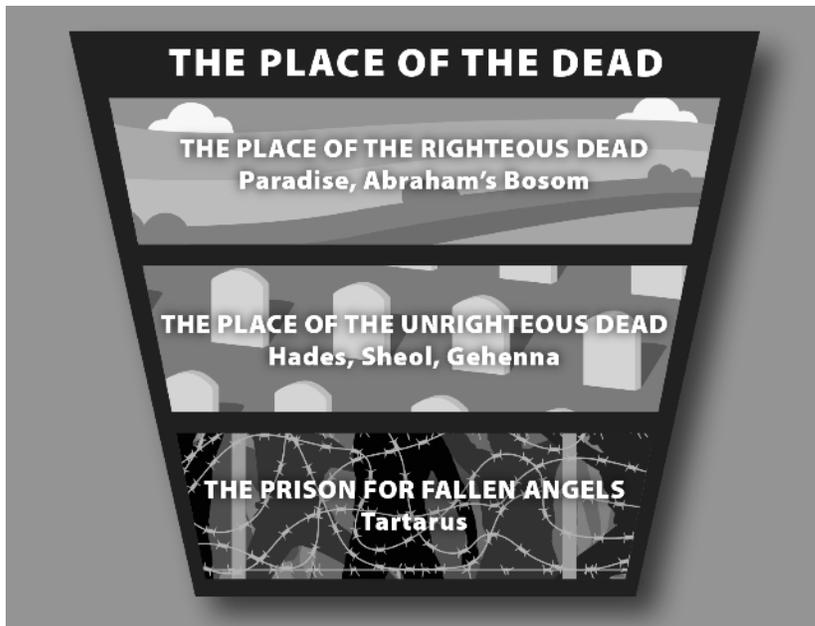
(1) Where did he descend?

The primary text cited for the descent to the dead is **1 Peter 3:18-22**.

- But there's actually a rich tapestry of texts that speak of **the righteous dead in paradise, Abraham's Bosom**, and of **the unrighteous dead in Hades, Sheol, and Gehenna**.
 - **Psalm 16** ("not abandoned by soul to sheol [the unrighteous dead]), which Peter preaches from in **2:25-28**
 - There is the Rich Man and Lazarus text in **Luke 16:19-31**. (Lazarus was in **Abraham's bosom (righteous dead)** and the Rich Man in **Hades [unrighteous dead]**)
 - There is the thief on the cross and Jesus speaking of "**Paradise** [the righteous dead] today." (**Lk 23:43**)
 - There is **Phil 2:10**, Jesus proclaiming to those '**under the earth**'

There's a lot to consider, and it's not my purpose today to explain all of this.

This figure on The Place of the Dead explains my own position:



Jesus descended to the place of the dead, his body in the grave, and his soul to the place of the righteous dead.

He experienced death as like everyone.

(2) What did He do?

Biblical texts point to Jesus having the ability to communicate with all the realm of the dead, and in that, he proclaimed victory.

He proclaimed victory achieved through his death, descent, and impending resurrection, to all the dead, righteous and unrighteous and to disobedient angels.

Peter says

1 Peter 3:18-19

¹⁸For 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, ¹⁹in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

This is a debated passage (I included it in my "Hardest passages of the NT that I used to make students preach from!)

Luther: "This is a strange text and certainly a more obscure passage than any other passage in the New Testament. I still do not know for sure what the apostle means."

Good and godly saints disagree here.

But my position is that **Jesus proclaimed victory to the dead.**

The questions are:

1. **Who** are the spirits in prison?
 - unbelievers who have died?
 - Old Testament believers who have died?
 - fallen angels?
2. **What** did Christ preach?
 - second chance for repentance?
 - completion of redemptive work?
 - final condemnation?
3. **When** did he preach?
 - in the days of Noah?
 - between his death and resurrection?
 - after his resurrection?

A. Who?

- In this text "**spirits in prison**" refers to this tplace of **where evil spirits/fallen angels lie**
- "Christ proclaimed his cosmic victory over the most evil of beings and of the most notorious of sinners in Jewish thought, those in of Genesis 6:1-8."
 - Schreiner calls this the majority view.
 - I disagree with him on the "when" question.

B. What?

- **Not a second chance. That's inconsistent with all of Scripture.**
- **He proclaimed triumph and announced final condemnation.**
- **It was announcement of his Lordship, His triumph, his victor which he won at Calvary.**
- **This fits with the theme of Peter, of suffering and vindication.**

C. When?

- **Days of Noah – meaning that the Spirit of Christ was in Noah preaching. That has a number of problems.**
- **We really have two options: and I don't think the resurrection is best.**

- I think the descent is best, and we should see the descent as having an exaltation component.
- He descends to the dead where he proclaims his victory over the evil spirits as well as over death itself through his death, remaining dead, awaiting resurrection.
- We could add **Rev 1:18** to this theology, he has descended and has *taken the keys of death and hades*, and proclaimed his victory over all.

On Friday a thief

On Sunday a king

Laid down in grief

But woke with the keys

Of hell on that day

First born of the slain

The man Jesus Christ laid

Death in his grave

1 Peter 4:6 is also important for thinking through this issue.

⁶For 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.

“judged in the flesh in the way people are, they might live in the spirit as God does” probably refers to all those **who had believed** from Noah’s time to the present.

- This means that Christ’s proclamation in the descent was a proclamation of victory for them.
- The righteous dead would have been waiting on this, to see what they had trusted in had come to fruition.
- Christ’s proclamation of victory was a preaching tour in the “under the earth” to those had died before his incarnation (all true believers from the beginning of the world), and to unbelievers and to disobedient spirits.
- Jesus did not experience torment or wrath in his descent (hence we don’t say “hell”).

So Christ’s descent was actually the beginning of his exaltation (Emerson).

In this view, Jesus defeated death in his death, descent and resurrection.

Implications

What comfort do we derive on this Holy Saturday? (1, 2, 4 point to our union with Christ)

1. **Baptism/Identity**

- In baptism we believe that we are united to Christ, who descended to the dead and rose again in triumph.
- Romans 6, “We have been united with him in a death like his”
- He will not abandon the Messiah to Sheol
- He will not abandon us either because we are united with Christ.

- “Remember your baptism” everyday, and in moments of temptation.
- Baptism is a declaration that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus has defeated our enemies, and that we live in victory over Satan, sin and death.
- This fills us with hope and joy.

2. The Communion of Saints

- We enjoy the communion of saints; that is, all believers throughout space and time are united by virtue of their union with Christ.
- What a marvelous thought that we are united to a local church as well as the universal church.

3. The Urgency of Mission (and the Necessity of belief)

- The descent proclamation is not a call for evangelism for the dead, therefore, we must proclaim the good news to people who are alive!
- So let us proclaim the good news faithfully and with a heart of compassion.
- If you’re not a Christian, believe now!

4. Hope for the Dying

- Christ experienced death the same way we will, but he defeated it.
- His body went into the grave and his human soul went to the place of the righteous dead.
- When we or our loved ones face death, we know physical death does not have the last word.
- “To be absent in the body is to be present with the Lord”
- He will never leave us nor forsake us.
- **Believers attend funerals, knowing that the body of a believer will decompose, but also that his/her soul will remain with Christ, awaiting the day when Christ will come again, and will reunite our bodies and souls in a glorious resurrection.**
- We will from the dead in a glorified body and we will dwell in a new heaven and new earth.
- This brings us comfort, especially **in this historical moment of death and dying.**
- We grieve, but not as those without hope (1 Thess 4:13).

Death, is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?

Rejoice, Christian. Your greatest problem has already been solved in Christ.