

Crucified for Us

Good Friday 2017

1st UMC Sunnyvale CA P. David Schlager

1 Peter 3:18-19

On this day **Jesus was horribly, brutally crucified,**
but what about tonight and tomorrow?

What was **Jesus doing in that dark, silent interim**
between his crucifixion today, Good Friday,
and his resurrection on Easter?

Where was he?

Was he simply lying in the grave?

He was crucified, dead, and buried,

that is the hard fact that gathers us this day.

But what is next?

Many churches say it every time they say the Apostles Creed.

Jesus not only suffered, not only was crucified and died,
but they also say,

"He descended into hell."

This sort of talk comes from 1 Peter 3:18-19 which says that

Christ was "Put to death in the flesh,

but made alive in the Spirit in which also

he went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison."

While it may be difficult to say precisely what Peter means by this statement.

But from a very early time the church interpreted this to say that

Jesus went to hell in that time between the Friday of his death
and the Sunday of his resurrection.

In that time between when he died at noon on Good Friday,

and rose just at dawn on Easter,

Jesus descended to hell.

There is a lot of debate these days over hell.

Rob Bell, pastor of a mega church in Michigan,

has written a book entitled Love Wins.

In it he says that *Hell may not exist* and that
*"every person who ever lived" could have a place in heaven,
whatever that turns out to be."*

He set off a fire storm in evangelical circles
with some conservative pastors accusing him of heresy.

After all the threat of Hell is a good money raising technique.
You can scare people in church with the threat
of burning forever in a lake of fire.

Actually, the debate goes back as far as the Bible and the early church.
We also know that the reformers wrote about it.
And that United Methodists disagree about Hell also.

So without getting too literal let's for the purposes of this sermon say that
*Hell is that place, that condition, where God is not.
Hell, a place that is characterized by the absence of God,
is the opposite of heaven, the place of the presence of God.
And Jesus descended to hell.*

What was he doing there?

The early church believed that
*Jesus went there to preach, to proclaim good news to the captives,
to those who had died, before he had come to earth.
Thus, we say, "he descended into hell."*

Some of the Protestant reformers said that
*Jesus went there to perform the rescue of those who had died,
those who had lived and died before his Incarnation.*

Luther said that
*Jesus went to hell to fight with the devil, as the leader of
a military expedition sent out against the "prince of evil."*

The Protestant reformer, John Calvin, took the phrase "descended into hell"
in a more metaphorical sense.

Calvin thought
*that the phrase referred to the doubt, the fear, and the questioning
that Jesus went through before his death.*

*When he prayed in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane,
Jesus was in virtual hell.*

Calvin reasoned,

*Hell, is separation from God,
the agony of having to face suffering and death
without feeling the near presence of God:
"No more terrible abyss can be conceived
than to feel yourself forsaken and estranged from God;
and when you call upon him not to be heard," said Calvin.*

The twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian

Hans Urs Von Balthasar said that

*in that time between Good Friday and Easter, on Holy Saturday,
Jesus descended into
"solidarity . . . with those who have lost their way from God."*

*On Friday, on the cross, Jesus deals with all of those
who have separated themselves from God in this life.*

*Those on the top and those on the bottom,
the rich and the poor,
all of those who turned away
when God offered them the hand of grace,*

*These are the ones
who now become the objects of God's special care.*

Jesus reaches out, reaches down, and again offers the hand of grace.

*Thus, on Saturday, Holy Saturday,
this work of Christ continues,
as Christ descends into the loneliness,
down into the darkness, and the utter absence of God.
He descended to hell.*

While we don't talk much today about this rather obscure Christian belief,
and while it's a belief that is not much discussed in scripture,

I think it is a wonderful affirmation of faith
for us to ponder on this Good Friday.

Within this belief that Jesus "*descended to hell*," is a great affirmation.

That affirmation is this:

*No matter how dark, mysterious, and difficult life gets,
Christ is there.*

Jesus not only has compassion, he acts with compassion.

Sometimes we forget that

the "good news" of the gospel is the news that God acts.

The Christian faith is not so much what we do,

but rather our response to the mighty acts of God.

The great theologian Karl Barth says:

*The gospel is made up of the mighty acts of God in history
for the liberation of the cosmos.*

It is not a set of rickety arguments

about the divine order.

It is not the expression of

some sublime religious experience brought mysteriously to verbal form;

It is not a romantic report

about awareness of God in nature;

It is not a speculative, philosophical theory

about the nature of ultimate reality;

It is not a set of pious or moral maxims

designed to straighten out the world;

It is not a legalistic lament

about the meanness of human nature;

It is not a sentimental journey

down memory lane into ancient history.

It is the unique narrative of what God has done

*to inaugurate [God's] kingdom in Jesus of Nazareth,
crucified outside Jerusalem,*

risen from the dead, seated at the right hand of God,

and now reigning eternally with the Father,

through the activity of the Holy Spirit,

in the church and in the world.

Where this is not announced, it will not be known.

(Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, 1989, p. 126.)

That great preacher Fred Cradock tells a story about his childhood.

*In the gathering dark of summer evenings,
we played in the great yard, amid the circling woods,
we played, "lost and found."*

*There was always one kid who spoiled the whole game
by being too good at hiding himself.*

*Every kid ought to know that in lost and found,
you want to hide well, but not too well.
Eventually, you must be found.*

*But this kid was great at hiding.
He went way out beyond the bounds, out into the dark woods.
Or he would slither down into the basement,
where nobody would go to look for him.*

*Do you know somebody who,
even though not a kid, is really good at hiding?
Well anyway, one by one, people would be found.
"Why, shucks, you found me," each would say.*

*But this kid would never be found.
And so we would go on with another game.
He would eventually come back, furious.
"The purpose of the game is hide and seek" he would lecture us,
"Not hide and give up."*

*But there are some people who are so good at hiding,
so good at camouflaging themselves,
so good at tucking themselves away where nobody would dare look,
that they just ruin the game.
Do you know somebody like that?*

Well, *this Good Friday you have been found.*

*No matter what you do to remove yourself from the loving reach of God,
you cannot do anything that will utterly, irretrievably remove you from God.
Even in hell, even there, there is God's loving reach.
Because Christ is there, even in hell, so is the love of God.*

On the cross Jesus demonstrates that
*there are absolutely no limits that he will not go to
in order to get us, to grab us and find us and save us,
to bring us home.*

That Jesus would descend even to hell to reach out to us is an affirmation that
*there is no place to which you can descend
that Jesus will not descend to reach to you.*

A number of years ago an old friend of mine hit bottom.

Actually, he spun out of control
he took the off ramp at 100 miles an hour.

In other words, he fell from his life.
*He lost his job, he lost his wife, his friends
and dropped into the depths of alcoholism.*

The good news is, he is on his way back.
thanks to the good work of Alcoholics Anonymous.

You know among the many things that have surprised him
on his way back to life was church.

He had always sort of gone to church.
But like many smart people
he always considered himself a step or so above it all.
*Church was for losers,
Church was for the gullible
Church was for intellectual wimps.*

He told me
“you’d be amazed at what I’ve learned about God lately”
Like what?
So many things

He said,
*So many things, I had heard all my life in church
have suddenly, like a flash of blinding light have become real to me.
Word’s, little Christian slogans, that I’ve heard all my life,
are suddenly, amazingly real, deep, and true.”*

Like what?

Like being born again.

or like 'you can only find your life by losing it'

Or say like

'you take up your cross daily and follow me.'

He said.

Through my pain, by hitting bottom I've met God,"

I asked

And who is the God you have met?

My Friend said

God is a mean relentless, devastating fiend,

who won't have us until we are down on our knees,

whimpering like a baby, so weak, stupid and helpless,

I don't know whether I've been born or I've died."

One sunny day Jesus' disciples said to him,

"Teach us to pray."

In response, he taught them,

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . . "

You know that prayer.

Today, this dark, bloody Friday that we call "Good,"

Jesus teaches us another, more difficult,

but perhaps even more consoling prayer:

"Our Father who art in hell, hallowed be thy name . . . "