

Jesus' Descent into Hell (1st Sunday of Lent, Year B)

1 Peter 3:18-22—Baptism Now Saves You

¹⁸ For *Christ also died for sins once for all*, 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*; ¹⁹ *in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison*, ²⁰ who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ *Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you*, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through *the resurrection of Jesus Christ*, ²² *who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God*, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him. (1 Peter 3:18-22)

1. Crucifixion: “Christ also died for sins” (3:18)
2. Baptism: “corresponds to this, now *saves you*” (3:21)
3. Resurrection: “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (3:21)
4. Ascension: “who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God” (3:22)
5. Option#1: Christ's Descent into Sheol:
 - a. Christ's soul (“spirit”) goes to realm of dead (cf. Heb 12:2)
 - b. Explains “gospel” being “preached even to the dead” (cf. 1 Pet 4:6).
 - c. Weakness: “made alive in the spirit” sounds like the Resurrection
 - d. Most ancient interpretation (Clement of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 16:16)
6. Option#2: Christ's Pre-Incarnate Preaching in the “Spirit” through Noah:
 - a. Christ preached “in the spirit” (1 Pet 3:18) in “the days of Noah” (1 Pet 3:20)
 - b. Pre-incarnate activity of Christ *through* prophet Noah
 - c. Coheres with “the Spirit of Christ” active “within” OT Prophets (1 Pet 1:11)
 - d. Weakness: context is Jesus' paschal mystery, not pre-existence (1 Pet 3:18, 22)
 - e. Supported by Augustine of Hippo, *Letter* 164 to Evodius
 - f. Supported by Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIIa, Q. 52, A. 2
7. Option #3: Christ's Proclamation of Victory to the Fallen Angels after His Death:
 - a. “Made alive in the spirit” = bodily resurrection (1 Pet 3:18; cf. 1 Cor 15:22).
 - b. “Spirits in prison” = fallen angels (cf. *1 Enoch* 6-21, *Jubilees* 5:1-11;).
 - c. Jesus “journeys” to the spiritual “prison” of the wicked angels to proclaim victory
 - d. Makes sense of reference to “the days of Noah” (1 Pet 3:19; Gen 6:1-4).
 - e. Weakness: “the gospel was preached even to the dead” = humans (1 Pet 3:6)
 - f. Weakness: “judge the living and the dead” = actual (not spiritually) dead (1 Pet 3:5)
 - f. Weakness: no ancient support in Church Fathers.

The Catechism on Jesus' Descent to the Dead

The frequent New Testament affirmations that Jesus was “raised from the dead” presuppose that the crucified one sojourned in the realm of the dead prior to his

resurrection. *This was the first meaning given in the apostolic preaching to Christ's descent into hell: that Jesus, like all men, experienced death and in his soul joined the others in the realm of the dead. But he descended there as Savior, proclaiming the Good News to the spirits imprisoned there.* (CCC 632, citing 1 Peter 3:18-19)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (1st Sunday of Lent, Year B)

1. What does Peter mean when he says that Jesus went and “preached to the spirits in prison” (1 Pet 3:19)? Which interpretation do you find most convincing? Why?

For Further Reading

1. Daniel Keating, *First and Second Peter, Jude*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011.