

THE GREATEST SERMON EVER PREACHED

What happened to Jesus in the three days between his death by crucifixion and his resurrection? Where was he? Did he perhaps return to heaven for a time, to catch his breath after all the horrific pain and anguish he had experienced, and spend some family time with his Heavenly Father before returning to earth and stepping out of the tomb? Or did he stay put in his grave? Was Jesus literally dead to the world, with no awareness, no consciousness? Was he in a deep and dark slumber while he awaited God's glorious act of raising him up?

The only indication in the entire Bible of what happened to Jesus during the three dark and somber days he spent in the tomb is found in this morning's reading from the first letter of Peter. "[Christ] was put to death in the body, but made alive in the Spirit. After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits—to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built."

Another translation of the Bible puts it this way: "[Christ] went and preached to the spirits in prison . . ."

A few verses later, in 1 Peter 4:6, the author added, ". . . For this is the reason the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, although they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God does."

When I was a kid and a practicing Roman Catholic, an affirmation of faith called *the Apostles' Creed* was recited at every Mass. It's been so long since I've worshipped at a Mass that I don't know if it still is, but when we have a baptism here in our church I include a reading of *the Apostles' Creed* as part of the ceremony.

The Catholic version of this ancient Christian creed has this line in it: "[Jesus] suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again." The version of the Apostles' Creed we use states it this way: "He descended to the dead."

That statement, whichever version is used, stems directly from the line in First Peter we read this morning: “[Christ] went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison . . .”

So, what should we make of that statement? Is it an important teaching of our Christian faith? Does it have any significance or relevance for us? I have to admit, I love the image that declaration conjures up in my mind of Jesus, immediately after his crucifixion and death, storming the gates of hell during the three days before he was resurrected and preaching the good news of God’s grace to those who had never had the opportunity to hear that message before they died.

What a sermon that must have been! It leaves a very potent impression in my mind of the great power of the resurrected Christ and his ability to save us, no matter how far gone we are. Even when we die. In fact, even after we die! But that doesn’t necessarily mean we have to take those words in 1 Peter literally; because the general point the author of that letter was trying to make should be good enough for us: God’s love has a very long reach.

God’s reach is so long, in fact, that there’s no place and no thing in all of creation, including death and hell, that is beyond the reach of God’s saving hand. This understanding of the immeasurably long, all-embracing reach of God is nothing new. In one of the ancient psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 139, written a thousand or more years before Jesus came on the scene, the psalmist wrote, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in *Sheol* [the abode of the dead] you are there. “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night shines as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

I read a story recently that illustrates God’s very long reach toward us another way. Years ago in England, a poor house for the poverty-stricken and homeless caught fire. The flames quickly spread through the decrepit shelter, trapping the tenants who lived on the upper floors. A ladder was brought to rescue them, but it didn’t reach high enough. It seemed certain that they were doomed and would perish.

Suddenly a very tall man darted out of the crowd and hurriedly climbed to the top of the ladder. He balanced himself on the very top rung, and with his long arms he reached up and grabbed the windowsill on the top floor. The man clung there while the people inside literally climbed down over his body to reach the ladder. The rescuer was the last one to come down. His hands were

severely blistered and his hair was badly singed, but no one died in the fire.

Maybe that's sort of what the author of 1 Peter was trying to express about God's powerful, extensive love with his statement: "[Christ] went and preached to the spirits in prison . . ." What he was saying, in effect, was that God's reach toward us will never fall short, not even in death, because God's love refuses to give up on us, and God will never, ever write us off as a lost cause.

By the way, I think it's also extremely significant to remember when we're reading this Scripture verse that, in the Jewish tradition, the people of Noah's day were the wickedest generation that ever lived. The generation in Noah's time was so wicked, in fact, that the Lord came to regret ever having created human beings. Can you imagine that? It's like a parent telling his or her child, "I wish you had never been born." Think of the hurt, the sorrow and the anger God must have felt, to reach that point and feel that way about God's own beloved, precious human creatures.

So God decided, enough was enough. God was going to wipe the slate clean of God's humankind project and start all over again. And God opened the firmament in the sky and the rains poured down for forty days and forty nights, and swept away all those who had steadfastly and stubbornly refused God's love.

Now, consider how Peter's epistle says that those very same people whom God regretted making and allowed to be swept away in the flood, as wicked as they were, weren't swept beyond the reach of God's grace, because "[Christ] went and preached to [those] spirits in prison, and gave them yet another chance to repent and be reconciled to God.

In a book called *Same Kind of Different*, the true story is told of an unlikely friendship between two men, Denver Moore and Ron Hall. Denver was an elderly African American man who grew up in "virtual slavery," picking cotton for "the man" as late as the 1960s. Denver never imagined that he would be friends with Ron Hall, an upscale art broker who he described as "an SUV-driving, latté-sipping white man."

In the early days of their evolving friendship, they had a relationship-defining conversation at a *Starbucks*. Ron Hall learned the importance of intentionality as he wrote about how Denver set the conditions of their friendship. This is what happened, in Hall's own words.

Denver's smile had faded into seriousness, as if he'd had a rare moment of sunlight and then someone had closed the blinds. He stared down at the steam rolling up from his coffee cup. "I been thinkin' a lot about what you asked me."

I had no idea what he was talking about. “What did I ask you?”

“‘Bout bein’ your friend.”

My jaw dropped an inch. I’d forgotten that when I told him at the *Cactus Flower* that all I wanted from him was his friendship, he’d said that he would think about it. Now I was shocked that anyone would spend a week pondering such a question. While the whole conversation had slipped my mind, Denver had clearly spent serious time preparing an answer.

He looked up from his coffee and fixed me with one eye; the other squinted like Clint Eastwood. “There’s something I heard ‘bout white folks that bothers me, and it has to do with fishin’.”

He was serious and I didn’t dare laugh, but I did try to lighten the mood a little bit. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to help you,” I said, smiling. “I don’t even own a tackle box.”

Denver scowled, not amused. “I think you can.”

He spoke slowly and deliberately, keeping me pinned with that eyeball, ignoring the other *Starbucks* groupies coming and going on the patio around us. “I heard that when white folks go fishin’, they do something called ‘catch and release.’”

Catch and release? I nodded solemnly, suddenly nervous and curious at the same time.

“That really bothers me,” Denver went on. “I just can’t figure it out, ‘cause when my folks go fishin’, we really proud of what we catch, and we take it and show it off to everybody that’ll look. Then we eat what we catch. . . . in other words, we use it to sustain us. So it really bothers me that white folks would go to all that trouble to catch a fish, then after they done caught it, just throw it back in the water.”

He paused again, and the silence between us stretched a full minute.

“Did you hear what I said?”

I nodded, afraid to speak, afraid to offend. Denver looked away, then locked onto me again with a drill-bit stare.

“So, Mr. Ron, it occurred to me: If you is fishing for a friend you just gonna catch and release, then I ain’t got no desire to be your friend. But if you is looking for a real friend, then I’ll be one. Forever.”

The lesson I take from that story is, we don’t catch and release friends. We don’t catch and release God. And God certainly doesn’t catch and release us. No, God reaches out to us, loves us, and then God holds on to us tightly, always and forever, from the very first moment we open our hearts to God.

No matter how many times we have slapped the outstretched hand of God, turned our backs and run away, God will never give up on us. God will

never stop reaching out to us, in the hope that we will reach out to God in response. And no matter what kind of hellish prison we may have fallen into, be it a family hell, a hell of pain or grief or loss, an emotional hell, or some other form of hell, even of our own making, God has not and will never abandon us. If we think there's no ladder high enough for the Lord to reach us and save us, especially after death, then we have greatly underestimated how long our Savior's reach is.

And that, my friends, is Peter's point. There's nowhere we can ever lose ourselves that Christ can't come and proclaim the good news of salvation to us. There's no place we can ever stray from which God can't lead us home. And there's no death we can die from which Christ can't raise us up.

That's the proclamation Jesus offered to the lost spirits in prison, who were the wickedest of the wicked, and yet Christ our savior still came to them in love and gave them the greatest sermon ever preached. A sermon that declared, in no uncertain terms, that despite their wicked past, they were beloved. A sermon that announced that they were being released from their bleak prison of darkness and despair. A sermon that proclaimed that they were being rescued from their eternal death, and God was now offering them the glorious gift of Eternal Life.

That sermon is for us, too, you know. I don't know about you, but hearing it preached can help me get through those days when my spirit is locked up behind bars, and I feel like one of the doomed whom God probably regrets ever making.

Yes, it was a great sermon Jesus preached to those imprisoned souls: a sermon about freedom; a sermon about salvation; a sermon about everlasting life. I believe it was the greatest sermon ever preached. And my prayer is that Christ will come to us in spirit and preach that message to us over and over again, as many times as it takes for it to penetrate our hearts, and for us to trust and believe that it's true.

Thanks be to God. Amen.