



He Descended to Hell
Easter Vigil Reflections
Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams
April 4, 2015
Holy Saturday

Before we rush into our Easter celebration, I would like to hold us for another minute or two in the mystery of this night — the holiest night of the church year. The night that our Lord and Savior descended to hell, experiencing death in all its totality. There are no details of what happened there. In our creeds we confess that Christ descended to the dead, or as we used to say, he descended to hell. We have a handful of scriptures that say he proclaimed the gospel to all who were bound by death. The early church fathers taught that Christ entered death and hell not as a victim but as a victor. One early Easter sermon depicts Christ standing before the gates of hell and proclaiming, “It is I... I am he who destroys death, and triumphs over the enemy, and crushes Hades, and binds the strong man, and bears humanity off to the heavenly heights” (Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* 102).

But Christ’s disciples — the so-called witnesses to the resurrection — saw none of this. These were events hidden from mortal eyes, taking place beyond the veil that separates the living from the dead, this world from the world to come. To borrow the words of Barbara Brown Taylor:

Resurrection does not square with anything else we know about physical human life on earth. No one has ever seen it happen, which is why it helps me to remember that no one saw it happen [at the first Easter] either. The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus’ life that was entirely between him and God. There were no eyewitnesses whatsoever. No one on earth can say what happened inside that tomb [or in the realm of the dead], because no one was there. They all arrived after the fact. Two of them saw clothes. One of them saw angels. Most of them saw nothing at all because they were still in bed... but as it turned out that did not matter because the empty tomb was not the point.¹

The point is that he’s alive!

In the risen Christ, the divine and the human are united in one person forever. Jesus lives. He has returned to his physical body, and remains fully human even though he is no longer bound by time or space. The risen Christ “now rules everywhere, from one sea to the other, and to the end of the world ... as God” yet bears for all eternity the physical scars of his crucifixion.² Jesus’

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Escape from the Tomb (Jn. 20:1-18)” available at www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=640.

² interpreting The Formula of Concord, The Solid Declaration, Article VIII: Person of Christ in *The Book of Concord*, 620.26-621.27.

resurrection demonstrates that this world in all its physicality, its fleshiness, its creatureliness matters to God. Jesus' resurrection reveals to us that human life is part of God's life, and that participation in the life of God is the purpose of human life.³

The resurrection remains the central mystery at the heart of this spiritual path we call Christianity. The resurrection is something that happened between Jesus and God. There are no witnesses to that event. What Mary and the disciples saw was an empty tomb with two piles of clothes in it. They saw emptiness and absence, and a possible a grave robbery. Easter dawned happened when a man who looked like the gardener said, "Mary!" and she knew who he really was. Easter dawns for each of us in the same way, when we encounter the living Jesus in our midst and feel the power of his touch, turning us away from the past with all its guilt and shame, with all its brokenness and regrets, with all its confusion and misunderstandings toward a new and different future. A future illuminated by the light of the victorious, everliving Christ.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

³ Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond*, pp. 83-85.