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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE
Easter Vigil
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Text: Isaiah 55:11; I Peter 3:17–22

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah boldly declared that God sends forth His Word and His Word will accomplish that which He purposes; God's Word will be successful in the thing for which it was sent (Isaiah 55:11). No-thing and no-body can thwart God's Word. That's great comfort to us Christians at any time but maybe it should give us an extra measure of assurance today. Are we not witnessing the dissolution of what has historically been called Christendom? For so many centuries, we Christians in Europe, the Americas, and Australia have taken for granted that culture – the society in which we live – would at least be on friendly terms with Christian faith, morality, and sensibilities. This is no longer the case. Our surrounding culture is increasingly becoming more and more skeptical even outright hostile to Christian faith and piety.

And yet, we have the promise from Isaiah. God's Word will accomplish the task and purpose for which the Father sent it. Saints of the Lord, God's Word has not failed. It cannot and will not fail. The Word who was with God in the beginning and who is God will not disappoint. That powerful Word became Man. And we have seen His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Upon that Word, the Church is built and the gates of hell cannot prevail (Matthew 16:18).

The victory of God's Word in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ has received our total attention these past couple of days. In love, Jesus bequeathed to His Church His blessed Supper. On the night in which He was betrayed, He gave to us His body and blood to receive often as our highest good and greatest treasure. In love, Jesus went to Calvary's cross. God demonstrates His love us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Tonight, we consider briefly the love of Christ revealed in His burial and decent into hell.

All 4 gospels and the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15 make a purposeful, deliberate point that Jesus was buried; both the Nicene and Apostles' Creed highlight Christ's burial. The point shouldn't be missed. Jesus died, died by crucifixion, in fact. Only the dead are buried. The importance of this fact cannot be overstated for if Christ did not

die, then the atonement for our sins did not take place. If Christ did not die, then there is no resurrection. If the Lord Jesus did not rise from the dead, then there is no justification unto eternal life; our faith is in vain and we are still in our sins.

The Lord Jesus was buried because He died on Good Friday to take away the sins of the world. That is an accomplished fact. On this Holy Saturday, we remember that Jesus, the Word of God sent to accomplish all the Father purposes, was buried and rested in the tomb for us for our salvation.

Scripture also teaches that the Lord Jesus “descended into hell”; both the Apostles’ and Athanasian Creeds mention Christ’s descent into hell. That part of our Lord’s redemptive actions is, probably, the most perplexing to us. I Peter 3:18–20 says this about Christ’s descent into hell:

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...

Jesus, the Word of God in flesh and blood, descended into hell “in the spirit...and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” That’s the clearest statement of Christ’s descent into hell in Holy Scripture. Jesus descended into the realm of the dead in order to proclaim His victory over death, Satan, and the grave. He does not suffer the torments of hell. The cross, the place of suffering and torment for Jesus, is finished!

We don’t know what Jesus proclaimed to the spirits in prison but Colossians 2:14–15 may give us some insight into our Lord’s preaching: God the Father canceled, “the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.” Through Jesus, God the Father proclaimed His victory over sin, death, Satan, and all devils. This triumph was proclaimed by Jesus on Holy Saturday when He descended into hell. The Word made flesh accomplished exactly and completely what the Father purposed for the salvation of the world, just as Isaiah proclaimed the Word would do!!

One last thing related to Jesus’ burial and descent into hell ... the apostle Peter stated that Jesus “proclaimed to the spirits in prison” and immediately proceeds from there

(vs. 21–22) to teach about baptism, the Lord’s resurrection, and His ascension to the Father’s right hand:

²¹Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

Jesus’ descent into hell is part of the great drama of divine love and mighty redemption. Beloved saints of the living God, the Lord Jesus orders all things in your life and works them for your good according to His Word.

“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Alleluia! Christ, the Word of God, is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.