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St. John's Lutheran Church – Kimball, NE
Easter Vigil
April 4, 2015
Text: I Peter 3:17–22

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

The Apostles' Creed is the Church's ancient baptismal summary of faith. In the early Church, catechumens would gather during the vigil of Easter (Saturday night, just like tonight), in order to be baptized into the Trinitarian faith. During that service – which really was an all-night vigil – they would receive the sacred mysteries, as they were called: Holy Baptism, the Lord's Prayer, and eventually their first reception of the Lord's Supper during the Easter Sunrise service.

As with most things in the Church, customs varied from place to place and from time to time. In some regions, the catechumens would be baptized nude in order to emphasize the new birth. John's gospel teaches that we must be born again. As we were born without clothes on our natural birthday, so catechumens received similarly the new birth of the Spirit. But they didn't stay unclothed even as a newborn child is soon clothed after being born. As soon as the catechumens were baptized, they received a white, baptismal robe. The robe symbolized the righteousness of Jesus which now clothes them as St. Paul teaches in Galatians 3:27 and which St. John saw covering the saints of God worshipping before God's heavenly throne in Revelation 7:9–14.

What guided the instruction of the catechumens leading up to their baptism was the teachings of Scripture summarized in the Apostles' Creed. We follow similar traditions today. The creed forms the contours of our teaching in the main articles of the gospel for catechism classes, young and old. At baptisms, the Apostles' Creed is confessed, and the baptized are often clothed in a white baptismal robe.

Tonight, we followed, at least a semblance of the early church tradition in that we confessed anew our baptismal faith using the Apostles' Creed. Most of the creed is very familiar to us. God the Father is the maker of heaven and earth. Genesis 1. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and was buried. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But then we say, "He descended into hell." That sentence, quite arguably is most perplexing part of the creed. Everything following that statement – the

resurrection of Jesus, His return to judge the living and the dead – the 4 gospels, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Church, the forgiveness of sins, and so forth – all discussed in the book of Acts and NT epistles.

But what about Jesus descending into hell? What does it even mean? Did Jesus go to hell to suffer more after His crucifixion? Didn't the Lord say "It is finished" on the cross? To say that He had to suffer more in hell would strongly suggest that things weren't finished on the cross. When did Jesus descend to hell? Did He go there in body and soul? What did He do while there? And finally, and most importantly, does the Bible actually teach that Jesus descended into hell?

Before answering some of these questions, I must admit that I have never preached on this part of the Creed. I discuss it in catechism classes but this is my first sermon on the topic. I chose tonight's service to preach my first descent into hell sermon because Holy Saturday is the time the Church remembers and commemorates Jesus resting in His tomb while waiting in joyful vigil for the Easter celebration. Following the Lord's crucifixion, Jesus was hastily buried by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea because Jewish law required the Jews to rest on the Sabbath, Saturday. The tomb was sealed and Jesus rested in the tomb over what we now call Holy Saturday; that's today!

Jesus descended into hell after He was buried and the tomb was sealed. That answers the when question. What does the Bible say about our Lord's rest in the tomb and His descent into hell? Frankly, not much. But it does say a little in I Peter 3:18–22:

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. 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, according to both natures, descended into hell "and proclaimed to the spirits in prison." That's the clearest statement of Christ's descent into hell in all of Holy Scripture. Please note, Jesus descends victorious. He is not suffering the torments of hell. That He did on the cross and it's finished.

What did Jesus proclaim to these disobedient souls? We don't know the exact content but Colossians describes Jesus' triumph this way, 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" (Col 2:14–15). Through Jesus, God the Father proclaimed His victory of sin, death, Satan and all devils. This triumph was proclaimed by Jesus on Holy Saturday when He descended into hell.

Our Lutheran Confessions make this simple statement about Christ's descent, "It is enough if we know that Christ descended into hell, destroyed hell for all believers, and delivered them from the power of death and of the devil, from eternal condemnation and the jaws of hell. We will save our questions and not curiously investigate about how this happened until the other world" (FC EP IX:4).

Jesus' descent is a moment of victory and triumph for Christ and for us, for He did these things in our behalf. As much as Jesus' death and resurrection form the foundation of our eternal hope, so does our Lord's burial and descent.

One final connection...the apostle Peter stated that Jesus "proclaimed to the spirits in prison" and immediately proceeds from there to teach about baptism, the Lord's resurrection and His ascension to the Father's right hand:

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 good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

The Apostles' Creed gets it right. Jesus' descent into hell is part of the great drama of redemption; that drama we are celebrating over Holy Week. And the Church gets it right by using the creed during baptisms. That's one tradition worth celebrating and sustaining.

So maybe we can say tonight, "Alleluia! Christ was buried, descended into hell, and is risen. Alleluia. He is risen indeed!"

✠ 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.