

As we made our way through Holy Week, we observed special services of worship on Maundy Thursday, on Good Friday, and on Resurrection Sunday, noting that the sequence of events last week was exactly the same as it was when those events actually occurred:

- Palm Sunday fell on March 29, as it did in the year A.D. 33.
- Maundy Thursday fell on April 2, as it did then.
- Good Friday fell on April 3, the original Day of the Cross, A.D. 33.
- There was a “Blood Moon” (a total lunar eclipse) last Friday, as on 4.3.33.
- Passover began at Sundown on April 3 this year as it did in A.D. 33.
- Resurrection Day was April 5 this year, as it was then.

I don't know how many times this sequence has been repeated so exactly in these 1,982 years, but it was striking to live through the sequence this week. As we moved through the week, did it occur to you that we had no observance of any kind on Saturday (“Holy Saturday”)? And if you noticed that, did you wonder about it at all?

Holy Saturday is a big deal in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Holy Saturday service begins with the worship vestments and decorations being dark purple or black, and then, just before the Gospel reading, the liturgical colors are all changed to white. The Deacon performs a censuring (incense), and the Priest scatters laurel leaves around the church, symbolizing the broken gates of hell. All of this is done in celebration of “the harrowing of Hades” then taking place, and in anticipation of Christ's imminent resurrection.



The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

AMEN.

Have you ever heard of “The Harrowing of Hades”? More often called “The Harrowing of Hell,” the concept grows out of an obscure passage in 1 Peter that inspired a much-contested phrase in the Apostles' Creed: “he descended into hell.” (You'll note that the version shown here says “he descended to the dead,” which presupposes the argument I'm about to make.)

“The Harrowing of Hell” is not something of which Baptists make very much. You may well have never heard of it before. The text in question goes like this: *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He 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* (1 Peter 3:18-20a).

Let's begin with the idea of "harrowing." In the years when I was a "country parson," I learned that farmers harrow their fields about this time of the year, using apparatus pulled behind a tractor to dig into the soil and upend its top layers in order to prepare the soil for planting. The disks, spikes, or tines of the harrow break up the soil so that young plants will have an easier time in their early growth (and probably for other reasons).

City dwellers don't use "harrowing" in that same way. We talk about "harrowing experiences" as dreadful or frightening times in which death seems only a breath away. The connection between these uses of the word would seem to be "sharp" times that "break up" our lives and that *sometimes* may lead to new growth.

Because we understand the Bible to teach that we are spiritual beings who do not actually die when our physical bodies die, the question for Holy Saturday is "What was Jesus doing/what was happening to Him between His death and resurrection?"¹ We approach the answer to this question through the discipline known as "systematic theology." Systematic Theology attempts to examine every biblical text that might bear on a particular topic in order to discover and systematize what the Bible as a whole teaches about that topic.

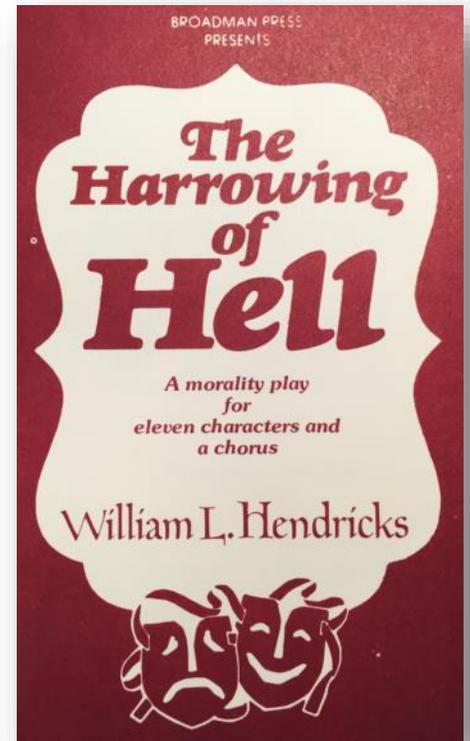
To greatly over-simplify the matter, the Old Testament idea about "the Intermediate State" was that all of the dead entered a realm known as "Sheol": *"you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay"* (Psalm 16:10). The New Testament generally translates the Hebrew "Sheol" as the Greek "Hades," which has a similar meaning (Matthew 16:18). On the other hand, the Old Testament tends to use the word "Gehenna" ("Valley of Hinnom") as the name for the destination of the wicked dead, and the New Testament usually translates "Gehenna" as "hell" (Matthew 5:22).²

Those traditions that make use of "the harrowing of Hell" believe that Jesus "descended into hell" in order to subdue it and to proclaim victory over evil once and for all; to set free the dead or some of the dead; and/or to proclaim a message to the dead or to some of the dead. The concept itself is subject to great debate, and achieving a trustworthy understanding of the verses in 1 Peter is a slippery undertaking indeed (see the attachment, "The Spirits in Prison"). We are wise to avoid building "theological castles" on so uncertain a foundation.

I submit to you that humility is in order when considering these things. When all is said and done, and we stand in God's Presence, then and only then will we discover the solution to this enigma . . . and in that Presence, such questions are quite likely to matter no more.

¹ A related question has to do with what happens to our loved ones—and eventually to us as well—between the time of our physical deaths and our resurrection when Jesus returns. This is technically called "The Intermediate State," and is beyond the scope of this particular discussion.

² Only one instance of the New Testament use of "hades" suggests suffering (Luke 16:23). The other instances are similar to "Sheol" in the Old Testament.



It seems best to lean into those passages of Scripture that are abundantly clear rather than casting about in the fog that has now surrounded 1 Peter 3:18-20 for two millennia. When we look at what Jesus told the thief on the cross, “*Today you will be with me in paradise*” (Luke 23:43), nothing we know about Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, or Hell seems to fit this promise. As John Piper put it, “I don’t think the thief went to hell and that hell is called paradise.”

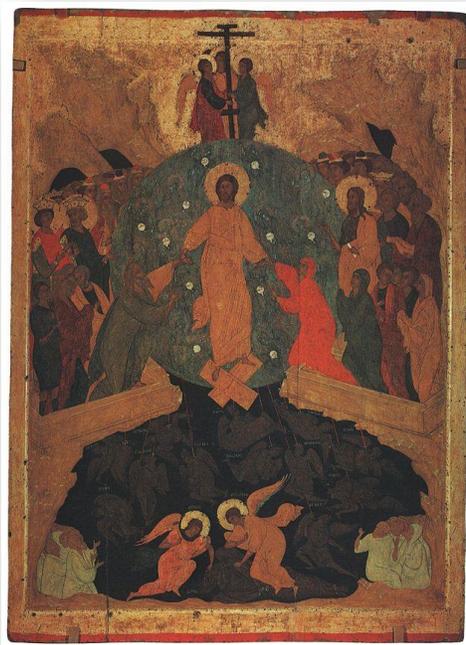
When Paul wrote, “*to live is Christ and to die is gain*” and “*I desire to depart and being with Christ*” (Philippians 1:21, 23), that doesn’t sound as though he expected to go to “the realm of the dead.” He expected to be in the very Presence of God.

Paul also wrote that “*When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross*” (Colossians 2:13-15).

I suggest to you that what we know for sure is this: (1) both Jesus and the repentant thief went to some reality worthy of the name, “paradise,” immediately upon their deaths; and (2), it was on the cross, and not at some later time, that Jesus “*disarmed the powers and authorities.*” It was at Calvary that Jesus nailed all of the (quite justified) charges against us to that same cross.

Rejoice with me! He is ALIVE!

Dave



P.S. On May 3, the OMI Clergy will sponsor a seminar by Dr. Diana Hayes on “Race & Faith.” I hope you’ll mark your calendars for this very special event.

Dr. Hayes is a retired professor at the Catholic Theological Union in DC, and is the author or editor of the following books. (She has *three* earned doctorates!)



- *Trouble Don't Last Always: Soul Prayers*
- *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology*
- *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World*
- *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*
- *Were You There? Stations of the Cross*
- *Many Faces of the Church*
- *Standing in the Shoes My Mother Made: A Womanist Theology*
- *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality*

Put this on your calendar. You don't want to miss this! 3 p.m. on Sunday, May 3.

