

## Descended into Hell, Rose Again from the Dead

### 1 Peter 1:3-9

The Apostles' Creed  
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Winston Churchill and George Bernard Shaw knew each other well in spite of the fact that they were at opposite ends of the political spectrum. In the 1930s Shaw went to Russia, met Joseph Stalin, and was so impressed that he promptly advised young men all over the world to pack up and move to the Soviet Union. Churchill, on the other hand, detested Bolshevism and continually fired off rhetorical broadsides at Stalin and his bloodthirsty crew. Needless to say, their differences over Russia did little to endear Shaw to Churchill and vice versa. Nevertheless, on one occasion Churchill received a cordial note from Shaw: "Dear Winnie, I would be pleased if you would accept an invitation to attend the opening performance of my new play." Churchill promptly replied, "Dear Bernie, I regret that a previous engagement will prevent me from attending the opening performance of your play. Since, however, I am free the next evening, I should be happy to receive tickets to the second performance . . . if there is one!"

When the sun set over Jerusalem on Good Friday, it was as if the curtain went down for the last time on Jesus of Nazareth. The critics had slandered him in the public media. The audience had cried out, "Away with him; crucify him!" His supporting cast had fled from the scene. And when they took his lifeless body off the cross and laid it in the tomb, everyone agreed there would be no second performance.

When we recite the words of the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell," we acknowledge that Jesus actually and really died, that his life ended in what appeared to be a decisive victory for the forces of evil. I must make it clear that the word "hell" in the Creed should read "hades" which in Hebrew does not refer to a place of eternal punishment. The Episcopal Book of Common Prayer contains two versions of the Apostles' Creed. The second version reads, "He descended to the dead." And that's what we mean when we say, "He descended to hell." Not that he spent time in Satan's domain, being punished by the archenemy of God. To say "he descended into hell" means simply that Jesus really died. There was no resuscitation, no Passover plot, no conspiracy to trick anyone. When the Roman authorities crucified Jesus, he really died. However powerful his parables, however holy his life, however compassionate his healings, however stalwart his faith in God, however enduring his devotion to his friends, however redemptive his vision for the world, Jesus died and was buried. He descended to the dead, which means that from every human angle the performance was over.

If you saw the film "Man of La Mancha," you will remember that Don Quixote, on his death bed, summons a burst of energy for one final fling at the impossible dream. For an instant there is fire in his eyes and valor in his voice. But then he slumps back onto his pillow and dies, his dreams forever dashed. And is that how it really is? Is death the cancellation notice tacked on the stage door where we play out our little performances? We don't want to believe that. In fact we protest against it by the very fact that we get up every morning and eat breakfast. The simplest actions in our daily routine constitute a protest against death. We rear our children, pay our bills, put something aside for a rainy day. We do what we can to make the world a more decent place, and by all those gestures we raise our picket signs against the finality of death.

"Ah," says the skeptic, "who can know? Who can really know whether death is final or not except someone who has come back from the dead to tell us." Peter introduces that person in today's text: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." And in the Apostles' Creed, following hard on the heels of the admission that Jesus died, really died, there comes this triumphant affirmation: "The third day, he rose again from the dead."

And that means that we can watch the morning news with its graphic portrayals of crime and war, and say, "Nevertheless, this is not the last word to be spoken over humanity." It means we can shed our tears at the grave of a loved one, and yet know that death is not the victor, but the vanquished. It means we can look at the future, darkened as it may be by advancing age, limited health, and cancelled opportunities, and yet face it with courage, because that's not all there is to our story. There is more, much more, as Peter testifies: "We have born anew to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you."

Kept in heaven: that's the Bible's guarantee that none who join Christ's cause will ever be cast off. In Peter's words, "by God's power we are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time."

"Guarded by God's power." Paul Rees once said that's power enough to cancel the guilt of long-standing sins; to snap the chains of unworthy habits; to uproot and destroy bad tempers; to turn weak and defeated Christians into living embodiments of holiness; to make the humblest among us a channel of blessing to others; and to carry us through the violent gales of life, across the turbulent waters of death, and to plant our feet, tired but triumphant, in the Paradise of God.

I confess there are times I doubt the power of God, and there have been many occasions when I have blocked the power of God. Yet I can also testify that God keeps breaking through my defenses, dispelling my doubts, and creating new scenes, alive with potential and possibility. If death could not hold him, our doubts cannot defeat him. Even our poor acting on the stage of life cannot discourage him, for he keeps coming and saying, "Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you."

If you have never joined Christ's company, do it today. If for some reason you have dropped out of the cast, re-enlist today. Jesus Christ wants nothing more than to give you a role in the most thrilling, joyous, hopeful, and triumphant drama this world has ever

seen. And the good news is, death has no power to ring down the curtain, for Christ is risen, and we have an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven. And your name is on the list of heirs. Thanks be to God!