

REJOICE IN GOD'S MERCY
1 Peter 3: 19-20; Luke 24: 1-12

When Jesus arose from the dead on that very first Easter, no one knew what they were seeing, and no one at the time thought to write it down. They talked about it; they wondered about it, but they really didn't know what it would mean for them, and they didn't really know what it would mean for people who came *before* them. And what would it mean for those who would come *after* them, like us? Let's see; by most accounts Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected again three days later in 33 A.D. The Jewish way of counting was Jesus died on Friday at 3:00 p.m. That was day one. The next day started at 6 pm and went for 24 hours; the third day started at 6 pm again and included sunrise and beyond on Easter morning. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John (the order they were written) were composed later in the first century, and they used various accounts of what people saw, heard, and believed. Thanks to people like the Apostle Paul, the news of the death and resurrection of the Son of God and Son of man spread. People saw that this was not just the death of a martyr, instead it was God snatching victory out of the jaws of defeat! And people thought about what Jesus had taught, and they decided that this death was more than the death of one man; it was the death of the sins of the world, of those who were believing in him. Paul said in Second Corinthians 5:19: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting peoples' sins against them." We credit Paul with having a close connection with the Lord after speaking with him on the road to Damascus in Acts chapter 9. Paul, along with Peter, and Barnabas, and Silas and others, took the news that by taking the nails, Jesus also took our sins on the cross, and by rising bodily from the grave, he went to reign at the Right Hand of his Father, which meant his Father had given him authority, blessing, and power. All through the first and second centuries, that message became a salvation message, and it went

out from Jerusalem to places like Galatia, Corinth, Thessalonika, Ephesus, and Rome. Copies of gospel manuscripts and letters would have been difficult to produce and even harder to distribute. It was not like today where most anyone who wants a Bible can obtain one. So the Christian leaders came up with a plan to codify, or encapsulate, the essential tenets—or beliefs—of what had become known as Christianity. It was in Antioch during one of Paul’s missionary journeys in the first century when people who called Jesus “Lord” were first called “Christians” according to Acts 11:26. But later, many other belief systems were being mixed with the ways of Christ taught by memory or by missionaries. So Christian leaders decided to put a short statement together to remind themselves, and tell others, what they believed. They called it “The Apostles’ Creed,” supposedly coming from the original Apostles, though we have no proof of that. But it did anchor the sometimes confusing beliefs of the early Christians. Although the Creed as we have it in our bulletins today has been used since at least the 6th century, it was based on a baptismal creed from the second century, meaning that seekers after Christ would say a kind of profession of faith like we do these days before someone is baptized. Even today, the Bible is our ultimate source of information and inspiration, but a Creed keeps us from going off the tracks of Christianity. For example, do we believe in resurrection, or reincarnation? The Bible, guided by the creed, will keep us on track. So let’s explore the teachings of the Bible through the lens of this Creed. Perhaps you will follow along in your bulletin.

“I believe [and maybe you do too] in God.” That means we think there is only one true God, not one God among many. “The Father” that’s what Jesus called him, but Genesis reminds us that God created humans, male and female in the holy image, so other pronouns or titles may work better for you. “Almighty.” There is no being on the earth or above the earth or under the earth who is mightier than God.

“Maker of heaven and earth.” That is all encompassing; it could say “Creator of the universe” and it would seem more expansive. “And in Jesus” the name the angel of the Lord told the virgin Mary to call her Son; “Christ” it’s a title, like ‘Messiah,’ or ‘anointed one,’ not a last name; “his only Son [God loves the children of the world, but God had only one uniquely born child, a Son,] He is “Our Lord.” That means we follow him, listen to him, and honor him. “He was conceived by the Holy Ghost” according to Luke chapter 1 verse 35, and “born of the virgin Mary,” meaning Mary was innocent, pure, and barely a young woman. “Suffered under Pontius Pilate” is true to an extent. Actually the High Priest presented trumped up charges, but only the Roman official who could declare a sentence of death. “Was crucified” -killed in a torturous fashion being nailed to a cross; “dead.” It had to be declared that he died; some said he just passed out or went unconscious. No. According to Mark 15:37, “he breathed his last.” He died, and then, the Bible says, he was buried in a tomb where no body had ever been placed before. Now here is the part that some Christian groups leave out; “he descended in Hell.” But it is biblical! “Where?” you might ask? 1 Peter 3: 19-20, and 1 Peter 4: 5-6.

Presbyterian author and minister Frederick Buechner wrote this in his book “Whistling in the Dark.”

There is an obscure passage in the First Epistle of Peter where the old saint writes after the crucifixion, Jesus went and preached to “the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey.” It’s not altogether clear what spirits he had in mind. Later on, it is not obscure. “The gospel was preached even to the dead,” he says, “that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God.” [1Peter 4: 5-6] “‘He descended into Hell’ is the way the Apostle’s Creed puts it. [New York: Harper & Row, 1988, p. 36.]

Famous Christian from Northern Ireland, C.S. Lewis, author of many beloved books like *Mere Christianity* and *The Great Divorce* which describes the divide

between Heaven and Hell, wrote this in a letter to a Mrs. Sutherland in 1960 on April 28, 1960. He called his writing “The Harrowing of Hell.”

Do you have hope of heaven? Do you know there’s a place prepared for you, and that in God’s plan, you now belong in heaven because of Jesus’ death and resurrection? ...I believe in something like this [he wrote.] We understand that Jesus did go to hell to preach to those who came before the cross. We understand that he saved some of them and brought them to heaven with him. [cslewis.com]

Frederick Buechner believes, as did Lewis, that Christ is always descending and redescending into hell. He is speaking to all people, “whichever side of the grave their hell happens to be on.” [Buechner, p. 37] Jesus knows the hellish anguish of the cross; he really descended to the place of the dead, and mentioned in First Peter, he sought to redeem them. Jesus is always trying to redeem those who decide, even very late in life, that he is the light. Professor Shirley Guthrie in his masterpiece work called *Christian Doctrine* wrote “There is no place—not even hell itself—where God is not present and at work with loving justice and just love.”

Jesus then ascended into heaven (because we know his body was no longer in the tomb) sitting on the right hand of the Father which is a metaphorical statement. The seat of honor was always the right one, and the hand of blessing is always the right one. Jesus was blessed by his faithfulness, even unto death. Then he had a new job: “to judge both the quick and the dead.” When I was growing, if I cut my fingernails too short, my grandmother would say “You’ve cut them to the quick.” The quick is the live part; the part that can feel pain. Jesus judges those who are alive and those who are dead.

Then the Creed includes a summary: “I believe in the Holy Ghost,” means that God is not just present in the Father and the Son, God is present in the Spirit, or

“Ghost” that was left for us here on earth after Jesus departed. That reminds us that God is really with us. About the “holy catholic church” phrase, it is lower case, not the title of a Denomination of Christians, Founder of the Presbyterian Church John Calvin said, “The True Church exists where the Word is rightly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, where virtue is encouraged and vice and vanquished.” So any congregation that meets that criteria is part of the holy universal church. “The communion of saints” imagines that when we gather especially for Holy Communion, a great cloud of witnesses joins and encourages us with the witness of their lives. “The forgiveness of sins” is fully what Jesus preached and did, and he expects us to do so too. “Resurrection of the body” refers to Jesus’ physically body being raised into heaven, but for us, our *spiritual* bodies can be raised into heaven, because the Bible says, in Paul’s First letter to the Corinthians, 15:50, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God.” Once we move from death to new life because we really die like Jesus really died, *then* we can inherit “The life everlasting.”

Creeds are not evil; they are notecards, meticulously researched to keep future generations on track. Thanks be to God, whose plan including judging—and saving—both the living **and** the dead.

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