

EPISTLE LESSON, FROM 1 PETER, THE 3RD CHAPTER

"Oh, the Places You'll Go!" is a classic Dr. Seuss book, often given as a graduation gift about this time of year. It uses whimsical verse and illustrations to explore life's ups and downs, from soaring successes to getting stuck in a "Slump" or "Waiting Place".

Have you ever thought about the places you'll go? Maybe you've already done a little traveling, so you're thinking of the places you've already seen. Maybe your grandchildren are hundreds of miles away, so you are eagerly longing to go see them. Or, maybe you're hoping the state of Montana will give you an elk tag so you can go there some day.

You, Dear Child of God, can rejoice and be glad because the Easter resurrection of Jesus Christ means that HELL is a place you will never see. This is what Peter is teaching us in our lesson today. Listen again to his words,

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God bring put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, that is, in hell.

Hell is a place we don't even like to think about. In the **folly** of our sinful thinking, we believe that God is too good to condemn us, or that we are too good for God to condemn. In fact, some churches today, believing the lies of the devil, have changed the wording in the Apostles' Creed to read, "He descended to the dead," because they deny the very existence of hell.

Yet, Scripture is very clear about the existence of hell as a real place. The Bible describes hell as *the outer darkness*. *In that place there will be*

weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 8:12). The Bible also describes hell as *the fiery furnace (Mt 13:42)*. The Apostle Paul describes hell as place where the unbeliever *will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might (2 Th 1:9)*.

Hell is a real place and it is a sad but true fact that people go to hell. Let's be very clear why people are condemned to hell -- unbelief, they do not believe in Christ as their Savior. It is not because of sin. If "sinners" went to hell, you and I would be doomed, because we all daily sin much. But of course, we are repentant. The unbelievers are not sorry for their sin and do not believe in Jesus; they remain dead in unbelief. The Bible says this, "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*" (Mk 16:16). In our text, we read: *the spirits in prison...formerly did not obey (v. 20)*. "Did not obey" literally means "did not believe".

Hell is a real place. Peter teaches Christ descended there and we confess that truth in the Creed, "He descended into hell."

We must understand these words **literally**, not figuratively nor symbolically. Some churches teach that the descent was figurative. They say that the words "He descended into hell" are symbolic of the pain and agony Christ suffered on the cross, that these words are merely an expression of the suffering Jesus experienced during His humiliation, especially on the cross. But, the Word of God refutes this -- Christ went to hell -- physically.

Some teach that Jesus descended into hell to let the souls out or to offer the souls in hell a second chance at salvation. These are also lies of the devil. Jesus did not descend to proclaim a second chance at salvation to unbelievers. The Bible is perfectly clear that after death, there is no

second chance at salvation. *It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*, the Bible says (He 9:27).

Christ physically descended into hell. Luther's *Small Catechism* says it this way: "The Scriptures teach that Christ, after He was made alive in His grave, descended into hell, not to suffer punishment, but to proclaim His victory over His enemies in hell (Question 143)."

What happened was this: On the cross, Christ suffered the pains of hell for us and for our salvation. And then, *He bowed His head and gave up His spirit (Jn 19:30)*. His lifeless body was taken from the cross and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. Then, early on the 3rd day, Jesus' body and soul were reunited. God made Him who was dead alive again! Before anyone on earth knew that He was alive again, before the angel rolled the stone away, Jesus descended -- soul and glorified body reunited -- to hell. He did not descend to suffer in any way. He descended into hell to **proclaim** His victory to the devil and all of hell. Think about this for a moment – Where was the first Easter sermon preached? In hell!

Jesus wanted Satan to know without any doubt that God's Word had come true. He had crushed the evil foe's head. The devil was defeated forever. Jesus descended to proclaim His victory to Satan.

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God, Peter writes (v. 18). And, that means Dear Child of God, that Jesus descended into hell so that you would never descend into hell. The third day, Jesus rose again from the dead. Forty days later, He ascended into heaven. *Jesus Christ...has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him*, our lesson reads (v. 22). In last Sunday's Gospel, our Lord promised us that He was ascending into heaven to prepare a

place in heaven for us there. *“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you myself, that where I am you may be also”* (Jn 14:3).

We live in Christ because we become one with Him in our baptism. Look at the words of Peter in our lesson, *the ark...in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ* (v. 21).

Let me remind you that this part of the church building in which we worship, sitting in the pews, the altar and cross before us, is called the “Nave.” “Nave” is the Latin word for “ship, ark”. The early Christians, by calling the part of the church in which we worship the “nave” were recalling Noah. Saints of God, we are on a journey. We are strangers on this earth; we are sailing on a journey to the safe harbor of heaven. As the ark saved Noah, we are safe in the ark of Christ’s Church.

That ark saved Noah, but it also subjected him to ridicule and scorn by an unbelieving world. Wind and waves beat upon that boat. Even after the rain stopped, it seemed that Noah would never touch foot on dry ground again. His faith was tried. But, God, who began that good work, saved Noah.

Like Noah, we will have anxious days and nights on this side of heaven. There are those things we will see that we don’t want to see: The graveside of a loved one. Your spouse, your parent, lying there on the hospital bed with all those tubes and instruments, and you helpless to do anything about it.

Let us never forget that we as journey through this vale of tears, the words of our Gospel, *“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you”*

(Jn 14:18). Christ is with us. He comes to us through the hearing of His Word and the eating and drinking of His Body and Blood to forgive our failures to trust in His will and strengthen us in the faith He began at our baptism to save us, just as He did Noah.

On this side of heaven, we are subject to frailty and death in the flesh, as was Christ. But like Christ, we will be raised. When we die, our souls will be immediately in heaven with the Lord. And on the day He comes again to be our judge, our souls will be reunited with glorified, resurrected bodies not subject to decay and death.

Our precious Savior Jesus crushed the head of Satan and descended into hell to proclaim His victory over His enemies in hell. Because Christ has done that for us, hell is a place you will never see.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.