

1 Peter 3:18-21
The Vigil of Easter
March 30, 2024

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

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Here we are in the earliest hours of Sunday evening – yes, recall that in the understanding of a ‘day’ by which most of the Scriptures are written, evening precedes morning: “There was evening and morning, the first day.” Our own hymnody confesses this, “Evening and morning, sunset and dawning...” – thus, here we are in the earliest hours of Easter Sunday, on the cusp of again breaking forth in the joyous proclamation of our Lord’s resurrection once in history, one *night* in history before the ladies came to the tomb at dawn... on the cusp of again breaking forth in joyous proclamation of Christ’s resurrection once in history *and* his resurrected status today and forevermore. And yet, in the darkness of the night, we are right to contemplate and meditate upon what our Lord’s divine plans included for those dark, silent hours between his death and resurrection.

It sometimes strikes us as cryptic, and even has been debated by naysayers in church history, that we confess regarding that more than a day between death and resurrection, “He descended into hell.” It’s such a clear, bold confession in the Apostles’ Creed, the Creed of our baptism, but doesn’t show up in

the Nicene Creed (though, if you need a tie-breaker, it *is* in the Athanasian Creed *and* throughout our Lutheran Confessions). Most importantly, where do we hear it in the Scriptures, by which all our ‘norming creeds’ are normed? – in 1 Peter, we read,

“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, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison**, because they formerly did not obey when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah...”

The inclusion in the Scriptures of Christ’s descent into hell and its description as a “proclaim[ing] to the spirits in prison” always answers the most *common question* about Jesus’ descent into hell – “Did he go to suffer?” “No, he went to proclaim; the suffering was done (“It is finished!”, he cried on the cross); but, the answer then also usually prompts two additional questions: (1) *What* was Jesus proclaiming? (2) Was he proclaiming for the benefit of those spirits in prison?

The latter question is implicitly answered by Peter’s description – “they formerly did not obey when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah”... and if His patience ran out with them when Noah’s ark was constructed, and if He wiped them out in the flood and destroyed them in that lesser removal of sin from the earth, then why would he now suddenly renew his patience and declare to them salvation? – as if their destruction outside

the safety of the ark was a divine *mistake*, and God now thought *better* of it and sought to right His own wrong. No, that's not why he preached to them.

To better understand *what* Jesus was proclaiming, and *why* they did not benefit, but you *do* benefit, let us paint the scene around this word "Gospel." The word "gospel" is no trite term of endearment about how God loves you – about how he could just reach out and pinch your cheeks and dote on you all over. The word "gospel" is a powerful word – "I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation!" Paul says. So, if it's a powerful word, we sometimes mistakenly interpret that, "Oh, the gospel must be some *mystical* power, some *magical* Word that saves"... No, that's not what that means. It is the power of God unto salvation, because the Word reports your salvation, and the wondrous report creates faith in your heart and confidence on account of the good news.

Indeed, the word "Gospel" literally means "a good report." Of course, the Greek language existed before the New Testament was written, and the Holy Spirit used the pre-existing Greek language in His inspired writing of the New Testament. So, it should not shock us that the term we translate "gospel" – εὐαγγέλιον in the Greek – already had a working definition. In fact, a definition based on war, battles, and battlefields.

The ευαγγελιον was the report that came from the battlefield by the mouth of the αγγελος – the messenger, the “angel.” When the battle was won and the tide of warfare was no longer in doubt, the αγγελος would be sent to run with the αγγελιον – “the report, the news.” Had his side lost, this would have (of course) been a bad report – in Greek, a “κακα-αγγελιον” ... *if* the messenger could survive long enough to even give the news of defeat! But, if his side had won, if the victory was no longer in doubt, he could run to deliver the ευ-αγγελιον – the good report. Can you picture that?

Isaiah puts words to your imagination when he describes that work of the courier: “How beautiful are the feet of him who brings good news...” Yes, by Isaiah’s description, you can imagine the messenger, perhaps himself dirty, sweaty, bloody, bearing the marks of the battle... you can imagine that courier running as quickly as his feet will carry him... And, as he comes running and proclaiming “We’ve won! We’ve won!”, then what a glorious scene of that messenger running through the fields towards the stronghold of would-be prisoners, but now – as the Scriptures call them – prisoners of hope, for their side has won... yes, how beautiful are the feet that carry such good news.

But, this particular warfare that the Scriptures describe is amazing, astonishing – that “combat stupendous”, the hymn calls

it – for a particular reason... not only because it is so deterministic for the salvation of all of history, but also because it is fought by two sides so numerically lopsided, uneven: on the one side, the many, many seed of Satan; on the other side, the One Seed of the woman. And, if only the One Seed of the woman, then that One Seed is not only conqueror, but also courier.

And, thus, in that combat stupendous, the conqueror – having cleared the battlefield – does not simply *remain* on the battlefield or even first run back to his own city... but rather He runs *forward* ... in other words, he first runs with the battlefield report to the walled fortress of *the enemy* – not to tell the enemy army and its leader, who lies defeated on the battlefield, his head crushed and all life and power pouring through the mortal wound... No, just as the first *prophetic* report of the victory was spoken to the Serpent in Eden, now the first *fulfilled* report goes to those who believed the Serpent rather than the Christ... who bet on, wagered on, sided with the Serpent rather than with the Christ... who expected the Serpent's win and so joined themselves to him and found supposed safehaven in his fortress.

So, though from afar it appeared that Christ had been conquered, seemingly defeated by hanging upon the cross, he now in victory leaves the crushed opponent on the battlefield and goes to the enemy's home castle, where the enemy's followers

and townspeople are waiting for the news of their expected triumph. But, instead, shattering news of defeat... they had found safehaven with the *wrong* leader, in the *wrong* fortress, under a *false* premise and *empty* promises... and now they are utterly destroyed. What weeping and gnashing of teeth in deep regret that they did not listen when the Lord and redeemer of all called them to repent and believe the good news first proclaimed in the shattered bliss of Eden.

But, now, having made the news known to the enemy and those who followed Satan and did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah – the days of that first 'typological,' preparatory destroying of sin, pointing forward to the greater reality – now, having preached to them of His victory over their scoffing, He now prepares to *rise* and run and report the news that is *good*. Listen to the words again: "How beautiful are the feet of him who brings (as a courier) **good news**, who publishes (as a reporter) **peace**, who brings (as fast as his feet will carry) **good news of happiness**, who publishes **salvation**, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns!" Yes, what a reporting of His victory in that combat stupendous – "Your God reigns!"

Now, you say, "Wait, what do you mean, 'He rises and runs' to proclaim it?" Surely not he, but his messengers!"

But how did Isaiah say it, “How beautiful are the feet of *him* (singular) who brings good news.” “Well, yes, pastor, but that’s just a reference to any one of the couriers.” Perhaps, but then how come the following verses speak of the watchmen ‘echoing’ the good news? – “The voice of your watchmen – they lift up their voice; together they sing for joy!” Are not pastors called “watchmen of Israel”, the ones who echo that *initial* good news report? ... the report of victory that the Christ proclaims and manifests in his own risen body. He is not content to just stand in triumph on the battlefield, his bruised heel crushing the enemy’s head... that is done, no reason to simply remain on the battlefield. No, he arises and comes *to you* with this good report.

The gospels say, when He sends His messengers, He *apostellos* them – a word meaning that He goes *with* them, He runs *with* them, He publishes the good report *with* them. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”...*apostello*. was not the Father with Christ in his mission, that Christ could regularly retreat for a moment and pray? Is Christ not with his messengers, that they may regularly retreat for a moment and pray? “Lo, I am with you always,” He promises, so that “He who hears you, hears Me.”

So, yes, of course, the apostolic messengers run... but *with* them, runs Christ – those beautiful nail-pierced feet running with and carrying and empowering the messengers he has called to be

his mouthpiece – and Christ runs to those terrified behind the castle walls, the townspeople huddled in quivering masses, wondering whether their God’s pre-battle assurances and promises were worth anything... Isn’t that how you often feel in daily life: ‘Is the Christian faith really worth anything?’ And the victorious Jesus declares to you the good news of your salvation... that your hope was *not* in vain, the safehaven of the Church is a mighty fortress and safehaven *forever*, your baptism into that saving ark of the Church is *not* to be scoffed or mocked or discarded or underappreciated... for it forever ties you to Him and His victory... Yes, He and his messengers now and forevermore go out, as He proclaims with His Word and manifestly with the presence of His very body and blood, “Your God reigns!”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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