

“He Descended Into Hell”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 16:7-11

New Testament Lesson: Acts 2:14, 22-32

Singer, songwriter Rich Mullins devoted his life to sharing the indwelling Spirit of God through music. One of his songs is titled, simply, Creed. We're going to hear that song in just a minute in a video I have for you this morning.

You'll recognize the words as the Apostles' Creed. But what I really want you to notice is the refrain, which explains why Mullins held this creed as central to the birth of his faith. He says in the refrain, "... I believe that what I believe/ Is what makes me what I am/ I did not make it, no it is making me/ It is the very truth of God and not/ the invention of any man." Let's listen. ...

"... I believe that what I believe/ Is what makes me what I am/ I did not make it, no it is making me."

It's interesting that Mullins' faith was born of something as ancient as the Apostles' Creed, dating back to the 9th Century. And actually, these basic tenants of our faith go back even further, all the way back to the first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles, and then all believers.

One of the most controversial statements about Jesus in the Apostle's Creed is where it says, "He descended into Hell." Some believe this statement speaks to the anguish and torture that Christ overcame on our behalf, descending into hell. Others argue that the suffering of Christ all took place on and before the cross, before he descended into hell.

Some early church leaders dropped that statement altogether, pointing out that it is not directly taken from scripture. In fact, there are churches today that have removed "descended into hell" from the version they use.

So the question is, what if anything do we lose by not affirming that Jesus Christ descended into hell prior to his rising to heaven. To explore that question, we turn to our New Testament reading. Peter and the other apostles are gathered together when suddenly from heaven the Spirit of God descends upon them in the form of tongues of fire. This empowers them to speak in other languages so that all gathered with them can hear the Good News of Jesus Christ.

And that's when Peter raises his voice and addresses the Israelites, telling them of Jesus' death and resurrection, showing them that there is no place above or below that has any power to bring Jesus down. Underscoring this, he recalls the words of King David from Psalm 16, where he said, "... You (O God) will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption." What does that mean?

At the time when King David said this, there was no concept among Israelites of life after death, apart from a few isolated miracles. In fact, that held true right up to that very first Pentecost when Peter gave voice to the Good News of Jesus Christ and the centrality of Jesus in God's gift of life everlasting.

"Since (David) was a prophet," says Peter, "he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.'" God raised up Jesus as a gift of life everlasting given to us through our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As I thought about that while contemplating this sermon, I noticed the long, draping green branches of the tree newly forming right outside my window. And I recalled all the dead, broken branches that I picked up from the yard as the snows of winter melted. While those trees will die someday, life will go on. The life of those trees will go on in every tree that takes root in that yard. Everlasting life reaching out to the cosmos and beyond – that is what we are as God's creation.

Had Jesus not descended into the farthest reaches of death – into hell or Hades – where would our faith be? It would end right there. We would have no certainty that Jesus prepares a place for us on the highest plane of life itself, with God in heaven alongside Jesus.

What that looks like, the sights and sounds of heaven, the feeling of being there with a God who loves us that much – I can only imagine what that's like. And in my imagining it, God gives rise to who I am just as Rich Mullins sings about- "I did not make it; no it is making me – the Spirit of hope in my heart that can't be overcome, the expressions of love and acceptance that Jesus gives rise to, the strength of perseverance that only God can provide."

No wonder Rich Mullins pointed to the Apostles' Creed as the origin of his very being, singing: "... I believe that what I believe/ Is what makes me what I am." As we celebrate the birth of the church, the rise of Christian faith, we look to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the origins of our faith.

As we get older, birthdays can bring thoughts of death – the death of a loved one no longer with us, or our own struggles as our joints and tendons begin to wear out or the mind begins to fail.

And yet, because of Jesus Christ, we need not dwell on such things. As difficult as they are, they are only momentary blips along the entirety of our earthly life and the expanse of our eternal life in the fullness of Christ.

“I saw the Lord always before me,” says David, “for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope.”

We live in hope. And in the hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, nothing can hurt us, nothing can hinder us. Our future is certain, as even death gives way to new life! Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, the privilege is ours to share in the loving, healing, reconciling mission of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, in this age and wherever we are; may your Spirit make us wise; may your Spirit guide us; may your Spirit renew us; may your Spirit strengthen us so that we will be strong in faith, discerning in proclamation, courageous in witness, persistent in good deeds. This we ask through the name of the Father,* praying as he Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

** From the Church of the Province of the West Indies, as cited in Desmond Tutu, An African Prayer Book (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 96-97.*