



**April 7, 2007**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

## **Holy Saturday**

I have been deeply moved as we have traveled together through this Holy Week.

-On Palm Sunday we rejoiced in the reminders of Jesus riding into the world, not as a conquering general, but as a humble servant, God's grace in the flesh.

-On Maundy Thursday we remembered the Last Supper, receiving the gift of Christ's body and blood, just as his friends did long ago. Then we witnessed Jesus' anguish as he prayed ALONE in the Garden of Gethsemane, recoiling from the brutality of his coming death.

-Last night, on Good Friday, we remembered the crowds clamoring, "Crucify him! Crucify him." Through music, prayer and Scripture we remembered it was FOR US Christ was taken, arrested, tried, mocked and beaten----- it was FOR US he died, cruelly executed on the cross.

Every Good Friday we leave the service remembering Christ's death, and his friends laying his broken body to rest in the tomb. What about Saturday? What was Christ experiencing through these many dark hours?

On this Holy Saturday, I'd like to share with you some thoughts about that. Let's read together one of our ancient affirmations of faith: The Apostles' Creed, printed in your bulletin. It dates back to before 390 AD, when it was first quoted in ancient documents. (READ CREED)

There is an ancient doctrine of the church, traditionally remembered on Holy Saturday, called the "Harrowing of Hell", or "Christ's Descent into Hades, Hell, or Limbo". This doctrine teaches that Christ was busy on Saturday. He went to the land of the dead where he broke the prisoners' bonds and led them into Paradise.

Some have asked me, “Is this teaching Scriptural?” The answer is, “not explicitly”. It’s like the doctrine of the Trinity, our God who is known in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Scriptures support this doctrine. John’s teachings that God’s Word became flesh, that Christ sends us a “Comforter”; Paul’s greetings in his letters that are in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit—these provide insights about our Triune God.

There are two Scriptures that support Christ’s descent to the dead:  
(Read 1 Peter 3:18-22 and Revelation 1:17b-18).

Others have asked, “How could Jesus, the sinless one, go to hell.... A place of punishment for sinners?”

Some scholars point out that the ancients did not use the word we translate as “hell” the same way we do today.

The Scripture in Revelation refers to this land of the dead with the Greek word, “Hades”. (N.T. written in Greek) Hades seems to correspond with the Hebrew word, “Sheol”, used in the O. T. (O. T. written in Hebrew) These scholars say Hades/Sheol wasn’t a place of punishment, really. This view suggests that Christ only traveled to a shadowy place where the dead had been waiting—kind of like a dim bus station. There Christ preached to them and offered them salvation, leading all those who chose to accompany him into paradise. Thus the good people of the O. T., Abraham and Sarah and so forth, were saved. This view draws back from the view that Christ went to HELL..... horrifying, horrible hell.

Friends, I am going to stand with the scholars and Christians through the ages who don’t hold back. I believe Jesus descended into HELL. Why?

The Apostles’ Creed was written in Latin and talks about Christ’s “descensus ad infernos”; descent into the inferno..... a place of FIRE.

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible describes Hades/Sheol as a pretty awful place and cites Scriptures to support that. Hades/Sheol is a place

- where there is no pleasure
- where God’s presence cannot be felt
- where constant thirst plagues all inhabitants
- where the rich man, Lazarus, who ignored the beggar at his gate, suffered

**TORMENT.**

The primary defining characteristic of hell is **SEPARATION FROM GOD.**

- It makes sense that Christ would go there.

-He entered the world to bridge the gap between us and God.  
-He died on the cross for us to BUILD that bridge.  
-He IS the bridge, bringing us home to God who misses us, and waits, longing for our return.  
-What amazing love he gives us... love that will even travel to the place where God is NOT to carry us over to the place where God IS.

Brothers and sisters, the events of Holy Week are indeed a mystery. I do not pretend to understand them completely. But I DO know that the doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell has been a gift to me.

I saw an engraving once, depicting the scene in hell. The people were chained, in rags, filthy, with tangled hair and knotted beards. And Christ was muscled, powerful and fierce. You could just FEEL his outrage. You could hear him shouting at Satan "These people are MINE. YOU CANNOT HAVE THEM!" He was ripping the chains from the walls and setting them free... with a great ring of keys on his belt. Let us trust in this Savior who comes to free us.

(Share Durers "Passion"- engraving of Christ harrowing hell- not the same as the one cited above, but similar. His hand grasps the hand of John the Baptist. Share question raised in Sunday School by a child: "If God came to save us through Jesus' death on the cross, what about the poor people who lived before he came?" The Harrowing of Hell proposes Christ claimed them on Holy Saturday. )

Friends, the other events of Holy Week show the humility of Christ, his gentleness, and willingness to make himself vulnerable and suffer for us.

The events of Holy Saturday tell me of Christ's strength and power, used on my behalf.

We may not be literally chained in hell. But many of us find ourselves in various kinds of chains. We REALLY NEED a Savior.

You may feel unable to challenge friends who are drawing you into ways of living that are destructive to you.

You may be grappling with an addiction of some kind, food, drink, drugs, pornography.

You may be unable to break out of despair into hope, but drag yourself through each gloomy day as it appears.

You may be pressured to buy things that are seen as “essential” to those dear to you—but you just can’t manage to bring in enough money-- for the 3,000 square foot home, the tropical vacations, the shiny new cars, the entirety of all college expenses for each of your children. You are chained to your work, long hours, weeks of travel, exhausting commutes.

You may be unable to think one good thing about yourself—disgusted with who you think you are. You feel incompetent, unattractive, dumb- without value of any kind.

You may be shackled by circumstances beyond your control—health problems, a spouse’s unfaithfulness, a child’s rebellion.

Lord, we are people who NEED a SAVIOR.

Hear this truth, my friends. Christ can go anywhere. He cannot be corrupted or harmed. He will even fight the powers of HELL to set you free from whatever holds you. Christ can set you free. Christ can save you. He is the Savior of the World. You belong to him. Trust him. Rely on him fully. Follow him only.

Reflection Time (Invite folks to answer questions printed in worship booklet:

What would be different in my life if I were truly free?

Would that change harm others?

How might that change glorify God?

What might be a first step Christ is inviting me to take?

(Sing “Onward Christian Soldiers”. If weather permits, move outside to the base of the crosses. Then sing “Amazing Grace”, exchange the Peace, hear closing prayer and blessing.)