

**Cedar Springs Apostles Creed Series**  
**He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again**  
**6/25/23**

Isaiah 53:3-6

John 12:24

1 Peter 3:18-19

**Big Idea: We must die to experience new life.**

I was excited when I heard that Cedar Springs' summer preaching series was on the Apostle's Creed. Then I received my assignment:

**He descended into hell. On the third day he rose again.**

Because I am such a godly man, my first response was, "Not that one!" Then I sensed the Lord say, "You need to sit with this. I'll show you what it means. And if you listen, you'll hear wisdom that will be helpful to you and those you serve." This morning I'd like to share with you what I learned on my journey with the strangest line of the Apostle's Creed.

Three scriptures reveal that something was going on in the life of God between Good Friday and Easter Saturday.

Jesus predicts he will visit the place of the dead between his death and resurrection in Matthew 12:40:

**"...as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40).**

Paul refers to our Lord's descent in Ephesians 4:8-10:

**"This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people' What does 'he ascended' mean except he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe)" (Eph. 4:8-10).**

Finally, a difficult verse in 1 Peter 3:18-19 also appears to reference Christ's descent into hell:

**For 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...1 Peter 3:18-19.**

Each text suggests Jesus descended into hell after he died and before he rose again. But why?

Peter is using the example of Jesus to encourage his suffering readers. "Are you suffering?" Peter asks his readers. "Remember that Christ himself suffered death on the cross. He was also victorious in his suffering, even proclaiming the victory of the cross to the spirits in hell."

Who are these spirits? They are most likely spiritual beings who have rebelled against God. Paul calls these wicked spirits principalities, powers, rulers, and authorities. He reminds believers that we are even now at war with these powers:

**We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:12).**

Jesus triumphed over these spirits at the cross.

**He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Colossians 2:15).**

After dying on the cross, Jesus proclaims his victory over sin and death to the wicked spirits of Satan's kingdom, the kingdom of hell, the empire of death.

I read many commentaries preparing for today because I was so unfamiliar with this doctrine. At first, I was solving an intellectual problem – what on earth does it mean to say that Jesus descended into hell? Eventually, however, I found myself meditating on some of the richest devotional writing I've ever read. My favorite paragraph comes from British scholar Edward Selwyn's classic commentary on 1 Peter. The scholar, writing by from London during the Blitz, found hope in Peter's vision of Christ preaching in hell:

**In an age which has seen religious persecution, war, and falsehood on an unprecedented scale, and has felt the ravages of evil in every corner of the world...St. Peter's statement that Christ, in the course of his passion and resurrection, made proclamation to these powers of evil—a statement which is in close accord with the**

teachings of St. Paul, speaks directly to our need and condition, reminding us of the true nature in which the Church is engaged...namely that all things will be brought into a state of obedience and harmony beneath the will of God. E.G. Selwyn, Commentary on 1 Peter.

I found comfort in this vision of Christ's total victory over the powers of evil. Yet I sensed there was something more God wanted to say. One morning I was sitting in my office meditating on this line of the creed. Then the Spirit brought John 12:24 to mind:

**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24)**

In this verse, Jesus teaches the spiritual principle revealed in his own death, descent, and resurrection:

**We must die to experience new life.**

Death makes space for new life.

There are seasons in our lives when we sense an ending. We must surrender to these endings, we must embrace these deaths, to make space for new life.

Are you sensing an ending in your life?

- You dread returning to your classroom in the fall.
- Your youngest child leaves for college.
- A close friend pulls away.
- Work that once gave meaning and joy to your life now bores you.
- Your beloved partner of fifty years dies.
- The judge has finalized your divorce.
- An injury keeps you from a hobby you love.
- A role you've found great satisfaction playing is now beautifully fulfilled by someone else.

- A moral mistake you made has closed off an opportunity.

Remember: Death makes space for new life.

About three years ago I began sensing my season as All Souls' pastor was coming to an end. I still loved the people and the mission. Yet something was shifting. God stopped speaking to me about the church's future ministry in the neighborhood. I was not leading well through the challenges of Covid and cultural conflict. My sermons were not connecting as well as they once did. I had more relational conflicts than in the earlier days of the church. I had little joy in the work.

At the time this was very frustrating. Today I can see what God was doing in this season. He used a season of dying, of ending, of descent, to help me realize that that it was time for a new leader with different gifts to lead the church into the future.

As I let go, God gave new vision. This renewal happened primarily through my friendship with Daryl Arnold, the pastor of Overcoming Believer's Church in East Knoxville. Six Austin East High School students were killed in the spring of 2021, I helped Daryl lead four of the funerals.

Daryl hosted a series of pastors' prayer meetings at his church because the community was experiencing so much chaos, grief, and pain. These were among the most powerful prayer meetings I've ever attended. I've never seen Christians hold grief and hope together like these pastors did.

I asked many questions driving home from those prayer meetings.

- What would the response have been if six kids were shot at my children's high school in a more affluent neighborhood?
- Why is the black community cut off from the white community in our city, geographically, economically, and relationally? What can be done about this?
- There are profound spiritual resources in the black church. How can the white church draw upon them?
- There are profound spiritual resources in the white church. How can the black church draw upon them?
- We've tried so many different racial reconciliation programs over the years. Why haven't these well-meaning programs worked effectively?

The questions turned into prayers. By the end of the spring, I sensed God calling me to step down as a pastor and spend the final years of my ministry pursuing racial healing.

I now work for the Knoxville Leadership Foundation. I'm creating small groups for black and brown and white Christians where we build trusting friendships that lead to serving together in the city. I feel like I am back in the flow of the Spirit again. Today All Souls has a brilliant new pastor, a creative, compassionate, and Christ-centered congregation, and a beautiful building in the heart of the city.

Death makes space for new life.

This is true at the end of our lives as well. When we say together, "He rose again on the third day" we are affirming our belief that even death itself makes space for eternal life, because of what Christ accomplished in his own death and resurrection.

Our belief is basically this: Jesus takes us with him as he breaks out of the prison of death.

The sixth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans declares that when we believe in Jesus we share in his victory over death.

**We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life. Romans 6:4**

This is why Paul can confidently write the Corinthians:

**"Since Christ has been raised from the dead...so also in Christ shall all be made alive." 1 Cor. 15:20-22.**

Jesus speaks of heaven as a great house.

**Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2).**

The writer Henri Nouwen calls this great house, where Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live together in loving unity, The House of Love. When we affirm that Jesus rose on the third day, we are saying we believe Jesus is preparing a place for us in the House of Love.

Death makes space for eternal life.

My father died a few minutes before 8 on Pentecost Sunday morning.

Dad lived a long and full life. He was still throwing his kayak on top of his SUV at 85. He met mom in a play at Grinnell College in 1954 and he kept acting until he was 86, taking the stage with the Tellico Community Players even when he'd forget half his lines. He seemed like the lovable old guy that keeps going forever. But nobody lives forever.

A series of fender benders and falls led him to move into The Villages in Farragut. A year later he moved into Northshore Heights Assisted Living where he spent his last year.

Dad loved *The Wind in the Willows*, especially the line where Ratty says to Mole, "Believe me my young friend, there is nothing—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats."

He couldn't get into his boat anymore, so on Thursday afternoons we'd grab a large Wendy's Frosty and head west on Northshore, ambling down leafy roads until we found Ft Loudon Marina.

We'd park by the water and look out over the docks. Dad often fell asleep. And as he slept, I thought about his death, and my own death, because when your father dies, you're next. I remembered all the times we messed about in boats – casting for northern pike at sunrise on the cold Canadian waters of the Saint Lawrence River, tacking our way across the Chesapeake Bay as students of the Annapolis Sailing School, learning to water ski in the muddy waters of a man-made Ohio lake, taking his grandchildren up the St Johns to look for manatees. I felt what counselors call anticipatory grief, the sadness you taste in your mouth when someone you love drifts away, like a rowboat slipping its moorings and quietly slipping off into the dawn mist. And you miss them even before they go.

Hospice called. My sister, who cared for my father so well his last year, spent the night at dad's bedside and went home to sleep. It was my turn. I sat next to dad in the dark while he slept. An hour later, dad stopped breathing.

One of the beautiful souls who cared so well for dad came into the room. She tidied up his bed and opened the window saying gently, "We always do this, so the soul can go wherever it's headed off to."

We say kind things to each other in the rooms where people we love have just died to ease the pain. But these well-intentioned offerings don't really give us hope. What does?

As dad's caregivers entered, I stepped out of the room for a moment. When I came back a few minutes later, I noticed the Easter decoration still hanging on dad's door.

Easter.

The day we remember that on the third day Jesus rose again.

The day we remember that all who believe will one day rise with him and find their room in the House of Love. Scripture says:

**If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9-10.**

Dad confessed and dad believed. And that's why I know I'll see him again.

Have you confessed with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believed in your heart that God raised him from the dead? This is how we are saved from the penalty of sin and the power of death and given the gift of eternal life, which begins even now.

This winter, as dad declined, Sandi and I read together the book *The Lost Art of Dying Well* by Dr. Lydia Dugwell. Dr. Dugwell observes that many of her patients simply will not accept the fact of their own mortality. They have an almost magical belief that the next medical intervention will be their salvation. She contrasts our medicalized way of approaching death, our culture of death denial, with the wisdom of Christians in earlier times, who believed accepting death was a spiritual practice with rich benefits. Here are some of them.

Accepting death cultivates gratitude. Every June morning, every firefly, every double fudge ice cream cone, every hour spent reading *Good Night Moon* to your grandchild, every day you get to make the world a little better through your work – is a gift of grace.

Accepting death brings perspective. Death reminds us of what really matters -- Friends. Family. God. Love.

Accepting death nurtures humility. There is nothing like a funeral to remind us that the problems filling up today's inbox won't mean much in fifty years.

Accepting death increases wisdom. We don't age like a fool, chasing a fantasy of endless youth. Instead, we accept the changing seasons of our life, and the shifting roles we play in each of them.

Accepting death deepens faith. Surrendering to God's love at our death is the ultimate act of trust.

Accepting death helps you finish well. Rejecting the culture of death denial allows you to have the conversations you want and need to have with the people you love in the last days of your life.

Why can we accept death? Because he rose again on the third day.

Let's pray.

Dear Jesus,

We affirm that you descended into hell.

We realize that we do not war against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of darkness. We affirm that you triumphed over these spirits through your death and resurrection. We affirm that we have been raised with you and even now are seated with you in the heavenly places. We affirm that we walk in your authority and your victory over the spirits that oppose us.

We believe that just as a seed dies to rise again, so too in our own lives death makes space for new life.

We also affirm that you rose from the dead on the third day. We are raised with you into a new kind of life, an eternal life that begins even now. We thank you that you have robbed death of its sting and given us the sure hope that you prepare a place in the House of Love for all who believe. Death indeed makes space for new life.

In your name,

Amen.



Are you denying death?