



The Great Descent

Christ shattered the gates of hell and raised those who had been dead from the ages. Hell groaned, death lamented, while the world and all people rejoiced together. —Ancient Hymn

Modern Christians generally celebrate Easter weekend by focusing on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday and his resurrection on Sunday morning, and well we should. These events stand at the very center of our faith.

But historically, believers also paid special attention to the gap day in between, traditionally called “Holy Saturday.” Of course, the day after Good Friday was a dark day. The apostles were paralyzed by grief and fear—in emotional freefall. In their crestfallen state, two disciples on the road to Emmaus reflected wistfully, “we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). As Easter dawned and Christ appeared alive to his loved ones, “Sad Saturday” would be no more. After that, believers would speculate with joy about Christ’s victorious “descensus” —i.e. his descent into death and victory over *hades*.

“Hell groaned, death lamented, while the world and all people rejoiced together.”

They didn’t imagine the Lord lounging in heaven’s “green room” or suffering in the dungeons of hell. Rather, they gravitated to biblical texts that prophesied a grand conquest over the powers of darkness. Here were some their key texts:

Job 38:17; Psalm 23:7; Psalm 68:18-22; Hosea 13:14; Zechariah 9:11; Matthew 12:38-41; Luke 11:21-22; Acts 2:24; Romans 10:7; Ephesians 4:7-10, Colossians 2:15; 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 1 Peter 4:6.

Some of these passages seem to be drawn out of context, but the early church, from Emmaus on, read their sacred scrolls through the Jesus lens. Why?

“...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27).

Later, our spiritual forefathers would enshrine the “Great Descent” into the Apostles Creed, as part of the faith “once for all entrusted to God’s holy people” (Jude 3). It proclaims, “[He] was crucified, dead and was buried. He descended into hell [Latin, *infernus*]. On the third day, he rose again.”

The biblical texts are like stray puzzle pieces, but

by the mid-fourth century, a narrative picture emerged in the liturgy, iconography and the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus. *Nicodemus is not an authentic gospel, nor was it heretical. Rather, it’s a beautiful Christian confession, speculating on the events of Holy Saturday. Its purpose was not to portray literal facts, but to proclaim of Christ over death.*

Chapters 1-8 recount the trial and crucifixion of Christ (based on Luke 23), including a solar eclipse, and Jesus’ burial.

In chapters 9-11, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea testify, are imprisoned, and Joseph miraculously escapes.

Chapter 12-22 brings us to the juicy bit! Leucius and Charinus, two souls resurrected from the dead, appear before the Sanhedrin to describe the so-called “harrowing of *hades*.” It’s well worth reading.

The witnesses saw a golden light beginning to shine in the darkness of hell. Then Simeon, Isaiah and John the Baptist announce the impending arrival of Christ. Adam and Seth chime in, and the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets gather to hear the good news.

At this point, Satan and “the prince of hell” (Beelzebub) start arguing. They’re terrified at Christ’s coming and want to bar the doors. The saints shout at them, quoting the Psalmist, “Open the gates that the King of Glory may come in!”

They needn’t bother! Christ arrives and shatters the gates, tramples death, binds Beelzebub, then proceeds to rescue Adam. He leads Adam by the hand, and the rest of the saints follow them up into Paradise. There they meet Enoch, Elijah and the crucified thief.

If this Gospel is late and fictional, what’s the point? It functions like any parable, delivering eternal truths draped in a story. Nicodemus’ message is true: Jesus has conquered death for us, so we need no longer be afraid. Christ has raised and redeemed human nature (Adam), and our destiny is eternal life with him.

As Hebrews 2 says, “...by his death he [broke] the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free[d] those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” □