

THE PASSION AND TRIUMPH OF ETERNAL SPRING

An enlightening perspective on Christ's
death and descent into hell

By Dr. Alyssa Pitstick

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Spring has sprung! The sky brims with blue. Flowerbeds ring with blossoms. Rivers leap to kiss and embrace the heights of their earthen banks. The world feels its blood quicken as the crisp air swells our lungs. It practically takes an effort of will to be glum!

Spring's hallmarks of new life are rightly associated with our celebration of the definitive triumph of life over death, the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, the cross is as much a part of his triumph as the empty tomb. By his bodily resurrection, Christ vanquished death, but by his perfect sacrifice of obedient love upon the cross, He conquered sin. By both, He overthrew the reign of the devil, through whose malice sin and death had entered the world. Jesus thus initiated a new Spring for humanity and, indeed, for all creation.

As Christians, we long to enter that definitive Spring. We believe that union with Christ begins that Spring in us and is the way by which we may eventually pass to its full glory. But if Christ's own passover was through the cross and death, then by being united with Him, we must go the same way. Let us look, then, more closely at that way and especially at one overlooked step along it: Christ's descent into hell. For if that descent was part of His passover, then it will also be part of ours.

Motivated by love of the Father and guided by obedience to the divine will, Jesus' life was one of service to his human brothers and sisters. This service was, first of all, to proclaim the truth about God to all without fear, for it is the response of faith that opens the soul to God's forgiveness and healing: "Your faith has healed you." But since Christ was Himself God's Word, God's truth, His whole life was a proclamation. All his actions manifested God's invitation to enter the divine life, together with His desire and work to save man with man's own cooperation. Both were supremely manifested during the Last Supper when Christ gave Himself sacramentally to the Church and, through her, to the world.

Would we follow Jesus into the eternal Spring by way of Holy Thursday, the eve of His passion? Then let us, too, serve all mankind for the love of God and in accord with His will. Let us, too, proclaim without fear the good news of truth and how it sets us free. Let our lives embody Christ and let us remain with Him in the heart of the Church.

One earthly Spring, a fine Friday dawned. That day, the Lamb of God was betrayed, arrested, abandoned, falsely accused, beaten, scourged, mocked, condemned, crucified—all of which would have been absolutely worthless without

His love for the Father and for each of us. Perfect love was offered up upon the altar of the cross, and deemed a pleasing sacrifice. It transformed the greatest apparent defeat into the greatest real triumph. If love can thus fill the senseless with significance, the saints were right to say Christ could have redeemed the world with a drop of His blood—and they were right, too, that the abundance He shed manifests the

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extravagance of His love. "Love covers a multitude of sins," and perfect love washes them clean away from anyone who steps into its flood.

Would we follow Jesus into the eternal Spring by way of Good Friday, the summit of His passion? Then let us, too, prize obedience to God more than the price of our own blood. United to Christ, let us, too, transform all our daily sufferings and the great agonies of life's watershed moments into triumph, even if one recognized only by the eyes of faith. Let our love, as a sharing in Christ's, rise as pleasing incense from the sacrifice of our lives, offered not only for those who love us, but especially for those who harm us. By the miracle of God's grace, may evil works thus not bear evil fruit, but God's own hundredfold fruit of holiness in human hearts.

With the shutting of Christ's eyes in death upon the cross, we come to His descent into hell. Here we must pause a little longer. To modern ears, "hell" denotes the eternal punishment Jesus characterized as a place of flames, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. But it used to be that "hell" could mean any abode of the dead that wasn't heaven. The literal meaning of the word in the creeds is simply "those below." Using physical images to express a spiritual reality, "those below" contrasts the abode of the dead with the heavens "above," which are "the throne of God" (Is 66:1). Before Christ, only God and those God brings to Himself (such as Elijah in the fiery chariot) are "up" in heaven.

Besides the hell of eternal fire, another non-heavenly abode would be purgatory. Some people die in friendship with God, but that friendship still has some rough spots. Purgatory's like a welcome mat: You know you're invited in to the feast, but you have to brush off any remaining dirt first!

Another non-heavenly abode would be for those who didn't die in the state of grace, but also hadn't committed any personal sin. Since punishment after death depends on guilt, these souls wouldn't suffer in what we today call hell. However, because they died without baptism, they also wouldn't have the beatitude to which God invites His adopted children. This abode is called the limbo of the children, or just limbo. Regardless of debate on the topic, it is a sign of God's mercy: After all, no one *deserves* heaven just because he exists!

The final 'hell' was called the limbo of the Fathers. Heaven had been closed after the first sin. Consequently, saintly

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people who died before Christ had to await the atonement for sin that He would accomplish by His death. The Church teaches that this limbo was characterized by peaceful repose.

So what happened in Christ's descent? Being truly human, Jesus died a true human death: His body went to the tomb, while His soul went to an abode of the dead. Both remained united to the Word, however, for Christ's death did not undo His Incarnation. The descent of Christ thus is a descent of the Son of the living God into the realm of death by means of His sinless human soul. Since He was perfectly holy, His soul wouldn't go to the hell of the damned, purgatory, or the limbo of the children. Thus Christ did not suffer in His descent.

Moreover, by His cross, Christ had made perfect union with God possible again. Thus, in His descent, Christ 'opened the gates of heaven' to those in the limbo of the Fathers by conferring on them the beatific vision; the noon of eternal Spring filled their souls. Christ descended into hell as a king enters the prison of a conquered castle and sets his faithful servants free. He thus fulfilled His parable about the plundering of the strong man and God's promises that the Christ would enlighten those in darkness and set prisoners free. In hell, Christ faithfully remembers those who were faithful to God during their life.

Would we follow Jesus into the eternal Spring by way of Holy Saturday, the first fruits of His passion? Our union with Christ is imaged in the holy souls in the limbo of the Fathers. We who are *now* united to God by His grace, who *now* believe in Him and keep His commandments, and who *now* await His return in glory are in a position similar to theirs. If we persevere in friendship with God (which includes seeking reconciliation with Him if we fall),

then like them, we too shall someday see Him coming to bring us into His heavenly glory!

All this is announced to the world in Christ's resurrection on Easter Sunday. Christ rises from the dead, His wounds made glorious, and ascends bodily to His Father. Sin, death, and the devil hold iron sway no longer; Christ is victor over them all. Jesus' resurrection is His own bodily entrance into the eternal Spring. In Him, the firstborn of many brethren, humanity passes over to eternal life. Thus Easter crowns all earthly Springs regardless of the date it falls upon. United to Christ, we look forward to our own resurrection into heaven after death and our resurrection in the body on the Last Day. Then shall our lungs swell with the pure breath of the Spirit, our eyes delight in the light of perfect truth, and our hearts and blood run warm with the sunfire of God's love.

"My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come...' " (Song 2:10-12). ■

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