

# THE EXALTATION OF THE CHRIST

John 5:21-29

Sixth Wednesday in Lent (Series B)

March 20, 2024

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 5, verses 21 through 29. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 5, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>21</sup> “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. <sup>22</sup> For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, <sup>23</sup> that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. <sup>24</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

<sup>25</sup> “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. <sup>26</sup> For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. <sup>27</sup> And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. <sup>28</sup> Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice <sup>29</sup> and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.”

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Sometimes the Christian religion just seems too good to be true. It promises the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Christ. But I think, *Really? Me? Why would God even want to forgive someone who sins as often as I do?* It seems too good to be true. Or maybe you don't even want it to be true. If we think we are good persons, or even if we just think we have the potential to be good, if we really try hard, we might not want forgiveness. We might want a chance to do it on our own first.

And the Christian religion promises eternal life. That's the end game of all of this. God promises that we will live forever through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That probably seems too good to be true. Sometimes we might kind of think that we're going to live forever, because we've never experienced being dead before. We don't know what that's like, so we can't imagine not existing. But we also see death all around us, so we know it's coming. So when we really think about death, eternal life seems too good to be true. Or you might not even want to live forever. We don't know any life that's better than this one. We don't know what a resurrected life is like. And this life can get kind of tiring, so maybe eighty or ninety years seems like enough. Eternal life in God's new creation just seems unrealistic, because it's so much different than our daily experience that we can't even imagine what it's like. It seems too good to be true. So we need to understand how it could be true.

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## THE EXALTATION OF THE CHRIST (John 5:21-29)

It is true because Jesus was exalted from death. Tonight we consider the exaltation of Jesus Christ. The last two Wednesdays we considered the humiliation of the Christ. That would be his incarnation, his life as a man under the Law, his sufferings, and his death. It's everything that was down, down, down, from heaven to earth, and down into death.

Tonight we consider the exaltation of Jesus Christ. So it's that part of the creed where we confess,

“He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from where He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

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It might be a little bit of a surprise to some, but Christ's descent into hell is not part of his humiliation. It's actually the start of his exaltation. Jesus did not descend into hell to suffer. He did not go there to pay for sins. His sacrifice for sins was completed at the cross. So, just before “he bowed his head and gave up his spirit,” he announced, **“It is finished”** (John 19:30). It seems natural to think that Jesus' descent into hell would be part of his sufferings, because hell is a place of suffering. But that's not why Jesus descended there.

Occasionally you might run into a Christian who rejects the Apostles' Creed. There are plenty of Christians who don't use it as part of their worship, so they might not think of it very much, but they don't reject. But occasionally we might run into someone who does reject it. Sometimes it's just a general objection, like they don't think we should have any creed other than the Bible. But if you ever find a Christian who actually thinks the creed is wrong, this is probably going to be the point they argue with. They might even say that the descent into hell isn't in the Bible. Except it is.

Christ's descent into hell is not a major doctrine. As far as I am aware, it's only taught in one or two places in the Bible. The “maybe” passage is in Ephesians. Paul speaks of Jesus descending (Eph. 4:9), but it's not clear whether he's talking about a descent into hell, or just Jesus' descent from heaven to earth. The certain passage is in 1 Peter 3. St. Peter writes,

“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, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah” (1 Peter 3:18-20a).

From this passage we don't learn much about Christ's descent into hell beyond the fact that it happened. The word Peter uses for hell is “prison.” It's not yet the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). But it's a place of conscious suffering until the Last Day, when death and hades are thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14-15).

The descent happened sometime after Jesus' crucifixion. Peter says, “Being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” So the common way of understanding this is that, after his crucifixion, but before his resurrection, Jesus, as a spirit, descended to hell. But that phrase could also be translated as, “... but made alive *by* the spirit.” So some theologians take it to mean that the descent into hell occurred very early in the morning after Jesus' resurrection. This view places the descent into hell after the resurrection, which reverses the order of the creed. But it's possible to read the text either way.

Jesus “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” This is why we say that Jesus did not go there to suffer. He went there to proclaim something. Some people suggest that he was preaching the gospel to them, as if they had a chance for repentance. But the Bible has a special word for

preaching the Gospel (εὐαγγελίζω), and this isn't it (κηρύσσω). So it seems more likely that Jesus is proclaiming his victory over the powers of darkness.

And then we also wonder what these "spirits" are that Jesus proclaims to. Are these the spirits of humans who disobeyed and were drowned in the flood? Or are they the evil spirits who tempted mankind into such deep wickedness and violence? The use of the word "spirit" instead of "soul" seems to indicate that these are evil spirits, that is, "demons," but it's possible to understand it either way.

So this passage from 1 Peter might create more questions than it answers. And I'll admit that I don't really know what to do with some of it. So I would urge some caution to not be too dogmatic about the details. I should admit too, though, that just because I don't know the answer to some of these questions does not mean that someone else can't. Sometimes we fall into the temptation of thinking that just because we don't know something, that must mean that nobody can know it. That's really arrogant. There are plenty of people smarter than me, and they might have good reasons to be certain about what they believe. I may be too dim or too sinful to clearly understand the descent into hell.

But I can say this much about Christ's descent into hell: it did happen, and it was not for the purpose of suffering. So we are right to confess it in the Apostles' Creed. It's the beginning of Jesus' exaltation. It begins to show that he is victorious over death. He has triumphed over the powers of hell.

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Then we confess, "The third day He rose again from the dead."

The resurrection of Jesus is prophesied in a number of Old Testament passages (e.g., Ps. 16:10; Is. 53:10-12). Jesus prophesies of it often in the gospels (e.g., John 2:18-22; Mark 10:32-34). And each of the four gospels record the historical event at the end of their books. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each give a chapter to it. John devotes two chapters to recording a series of post-resurrection appearances. And there are several passages in the epistles that teach the significance of Jesus' resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor. 15).

After suffering for sins, Jesus was exalted in his resurrection. His human body, which had been crucified, was raised from the dead. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Jesus did not rise only in spirit. His dead body came back to life. That's why the women and his apostles did not find his body lying in the tomb where they expected it to be. When they saw Jesus after his resurrection. That was not a spirit. It was the body they expected to be lying dead on a stone slab. But he was not dead. He was alive. And his human body was transformed. Whereas it could once become weak, it could once become tired, hungry, ill, and eventually die. Now it cannot. He was born under the Law (Gal. 4:4). So he was subject to all the same sufferings we endure. But when he suffered for sins, the Law was satisfied. He was no longer subject to the consequences of sin, so death could not hold him any longer. His resurrection is really the natural result of his sacrifice. If his sacrifice paid for sins, and it did, then death could no longer hold him. It had to let him go. And more than just letting him come back to life, death cannot cause any kind of pain or suffering to his body.

This is significant for us, because it's a preview of our resurrections. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says, "In fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20). "Firstfruits" means that there is more to come. And 1 John 3:2 says, "When he appears we shall be like him." His resurrection is the pattern for ours, because it was our sins that he atoned for. That means that death will not be able to hold us. We will be raised like him. More on that later.

Then we confess that Jesus “ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.”

The historical event of Jesus’ ascension is recorded in the last chapter of Luke and the first chapter of Acts. It is also prophesied in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 110:1). Jesus prophesied of it at his trial, just before his crucifixion (Matt. 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69). And the epistles reflect on it, like in the epistle lesson we read from 1 Corinthians (15:25, 27).

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples over the course of forty days (Acts 1:3). He proved himself many times and in many ways. Then he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of sight from his disciples (Acts 1:9). Now this does not mean that heaven is up at the top of earth’s atmosphere. We don’t know where, exactly heaven is. We don’t know if it’s in this universe or not. Probably not. But all of that is beside the point. The point of Jesus’ apostles seeing him ascend into the sky is to demonstrate that God the Father has exalted him to the highest place.

The ascension does not mean that Jesus is distant from us. Before he ascended, he promised to be with us always (Matt. 28:20). His ascension actually means that he is near to us. Paul says in Ephesians, “He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things” (4:10). When he was on earth, he was confined to one place. But now that he has ascended into heaven, he exercises his divine power to be present with us at all times and in all places.

Furthermore, the ascension means that he rules over all things. It may seem that powerful men rule the world. If that were true, the world would be a much worse place. But Jesus keeps the kings of the world under his thumb. As long as this sinful world exists, there will still be evil. But our Jesus reigns sovereign over all things, and just as the shore holds in the chaos of the ocean (Job 38:8-11), so also Jesus sets limits to the evil in the world.

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Jesus will reign in this way until the Last Day of this creation. On that day he will descend in the same way that he ascended (Acts 1:11). So we confess that “He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

When we confess that in the creed, we might think, *How will he judge the dead? And what’s the point of that?* When we say that, we mean those who are dead now, but when Jesus returns, they will be dead no more.

On the Last Day, when Jesus returns, all the dead will be raised. This includes believers and unbelievers. The resurrection of the dead is prophesied in the Old Testament, in passages like Ezekiel 37 and Daniel 12. There the LORD says to Daniel, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

In Paul’s letters, he sometimes speaks only of the resurrection of believers (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:16). He does not deny that unbelievers will also be raised to eternal judgment, but he writes in order to comfort worried Christians, so he focuses on what we will experience in the resurrection.

In the gospels, Jesus speaks of the judgment of the righteous and the wicked occurring at the same time (e.g., Matt. 25:31-46). In the passage we read from John 5, Jesus speaks of all mankind being raised at the same time. He says, “**Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment**” (5:28-29). So

it's not just the righteous who will live forever, but all people. Some will experience **"the resurrection of life,"** while others will experience **"the resurrection of judgment."**

There is a hell. And real people go there. And Jesus is the one who sends them there. But it is never because God does not love them, and it is never because Jesus didn't save them. Jesus calls them **"those who have done evil."** That's the reason for it. Now we might think, *How is that any different than the rest of us?* I have done evil. I cannot honestly put myself into the group of **"those who have done good."** But I don't expect to receive **"the resurrection of judgment."** Why not? Because Jesus also says, **"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life"** (5:24). Jesus makes it about faith.

So in one place Jesus makes eternal salvation a matter of trusting in him, but four verses later he seems to make it about doing good. How does that work? It's not a matter of pitting one thing Jesus says against another thing he says. Jesus is not so inconsistent as to say two completely contradictory things just a few verses apart. We must understand it in a way that both things are true. Otherwise we would have to say that Jesus doesn't even know what he's talking about. But he does. Here's the thing: when Jesus returns, he will judge us on the basis of good works, but it will not be our good works. Those who trust in Jesus receive credit for his works. Think of it this way: the judgment on the Last Day is all about who you trust in and the righteousness of the person you trust in. Do you trust in yourself? Then you will be judged for the evil you have done, and you will receive **"the resurrection of judgment."** Or do you trust in Jesus? Then his good works are credited to you, and you will receive **"the resurrection of life."** For those who trust in Christ, his glorious return on the Last Day is **"our blessed hope"** (Titus 2:13).

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We talked about Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and how he is the firstfruits of our resurrection. The Last Day is when we will experience that same kind of resurrection.

It seems too good to be true, because we have never experienced anything like it. And we can't even imagine what it will be like. The glory and bliss of it is beyond our comprehension. But just because we cannot comprehend it does not mean it isn't true. It is true, and it is greater than anything we can imagine, because Jesus is exalted. He was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he is coming again.

The whole point of Jesus humbling himself is so that he can bring us with him when he is exalted again. He came down from heaven and joined himself to us. He took on our human flesh. He was baptized, and we have been baptized into him. He suffered and died for our sin. Therefore, as he is raised from the dead and exalted, we will also be raised and exalted with him.

Imagine this. Or try to imagine it. It's a life better than anything we can even imagine. You will be raised like Jesus. Your body and soul will be transformed into his perfect image. Everything about you will be perfect. And you will live with Christ in perfection forever. This promise is yours through faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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**"He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.'** Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

**"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen"** (Rev. 22:20-21).