

I Am Coming to You

*A sermon by Madeleine Harris-Lerew, Seminarian
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

EASTER 6: MAY 14, 2023

ACTS 17:22-31 | PSALM 66:7-18 | 1 PETER 3:13-22 | JOHN 14:15-21

*In the words of our Savior Jesus Christ, "I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you."
In the name of our God whose very footsteps make death tremble. Amen.*

Happy Mother's Day! Happy Mother's Day both to those of you who are mothers in any capacity and also to this whole congregation. This is a mothering kind of place. So, Happy Mother's Day, St. Paul's.

As many of you know, next Sunday will be my last in the official seminarian role. This fills my heart with a great sadness. Annie and I have fallen in love with this community and have felt such a sense of home while being here. I have learned a ton, and I feel really, really grateful to have been learning from priests like Daniel and Louise and Paul, and I feel confident that if I am half the priest that any of them are, that will be a great success. So, if you're not planning to be here next Sunday, please find me after the service. I will be eager to give you a hug and say a farewell.

As this is my last sermon, I feel a sense of obligation to leave you with the best thing I've got. *[Laughter]* The best story I've ever heard, and to my great joy, the Lectionary has granted me such an opportunity.

The opportunity comes from today's epistle in 1 Peter, verses 19 to 20, in which there is a line that reads like this, "He, Jesus, was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey."

This is one of the handful of verses in the Bible that mentions what has come to be known as the "Harrowing of Hell." 'Harrowing' being an agricultural reference, it means to trouble or disrupt the earth that's being tilled. But the word can also have connotations of tormenting, and some have even equated its severity to that of crucifying. That's quite the image - the crucifying of Hell. I lose track of who I have told this next anecdote to, but it's good enough that I shy away from not repeating it.

One of my dearest professors in undergrad used to say, "If you get to the end of the *Lord of the Rings*, and your first thought is, 'Hang on, did that actually happen?' You might have read it wrong." Now, granted, we believe there is something perhaps qualitatively different about our Scriptures and the *Lord of the Rings*, but the point stands - there are so many ways for something to be true. Hold on to that as we continue.

The Harrowing of Hell is an ancient teaching that dates back at least to the third century and possibly before. It's the belief that in between Christ's death and resurrection, he descended to

hell. And that might sound familiar from the Apostles' Creed, which we recite sometimes, and he did so to preach to those imprisoned there. Some have understood this to mean that the souls kept there had a second chance to believe what was true. But others have claimed that maybe Christ did a lot more than preach when he was down there. Indeed, it is said that his very presence caused Hell itself to implode, birthing every captive forth into Christ's resurrection with him.

I'm convinced of the latter. It's a better story. But my point in preaching about it is not to actually convince you of anything, whether it happened or not. Remember, that might not be the right question. My purpose in preaching on it is to give you just one more tool in your theological toolbox to claim power in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There have been hundreds of adaptations of this story of the Harrowing of Hell, but I want to give you two today. The first one I'm going to talk about comes from the sixth century and the second comes from the fourth.

Pay attention to the stirrings of your heart as you listen to what follows. Reject the impulse to criticize and try to embrace what is true here. Let yourself be moved. This is the kind of story that has the power to change you. I know it's changed me.

So, the first image I want to give you comes from a sixth century hymn by a poet named Romanos the Melodist. He is famous for writing what are referred to as kontakia or corporate hymnody. The tradition would've been for these hymns to have been sung which, these hymns would sound more like plays to our modern ears, but they would be sung by congregations at all-night vigils, and one of his most well-known is titled *On the Victory of the Cross*.

The majority of the piece is set as a conversation between Hades, Death, and Satan - all as characters. And this would've been a literary move that would've been familiar at the time. The hymn is worth reading in its entirety but, for the sake of time, I want to just give you one image from it. Death and Hades are listening to Satan speak of what they believe to be their approaching victory as Christ is ready to be crucified, and they will have won.

But as this conversation is occurring, Hades, the prison of souls embodied, interjects and says:

*Oh, my priests and forces,
Who has fixed a nail in my heart?
A wooden spear has pierced me suddenly, and I am torn apart.
I am in pain - internal pain. I have a belly ache!
My senses make my spirit quiver,
And I am forced to vomit forth
Adam and those descended from Adam, given to me by a tree,
The tree leads them back
Again into Paradise.*

Let me walk you through that a little bit. What's happening here is that, in a moment in time when Christ is crucified, the cross upon which he is hung plunges beneath the earth of Golgotha, breaking outside of time, and pierces the gut of Hades. The torture mechanism meant to kill our Lord, instead betrays itself and destroys the one who sent it. The end of this

paragraph then makes a comparison between the wood of the cross and the wood of the Tree of Life from the Garden of Gethsemane. And at this point, the congregation who would be singing these words, would realize the weight of the words that they're saying - the wood that prefigures the cross in the very beginning foretells of Christ's victory in the very end. There was never a storyline where death won. There was never a scenario where Hell overtook Heaven, and the congregation sings forth in unison, "Again into Paradise."

The second example I want to give you is from the fourth century, from St. John Chrysostom, who was a father of the early church and Archbishop of Constantinople. He was given the nickname "Golden-Mouthed" because of the power of his words. Here's a portion of a sermon he once gave on Easter Sunday. It's pretty famous, so it might be familiar to you:

*Let no one fear death, for the death of our savior has set us free.
He has destroyed it by enduring it.
He destroyed hell when he descended into it.
He put it into an uproar, even as it tasted of his flesh.
Isaiah foretold this when he said, "You, oh hell have been troubled by encountering him below."
Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with.
It was in an uproar because it is mocked.
It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed.
It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated.
It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive.
Hell took a body and discovered God.
It took earth and encountered heaven.
It took what it saw and was overcome by what it did not see.
Oh death, where is thy sting?
Oh hell, where is thy victory?
Christ is risen, and you, oh death are annihilated.
Christ is risen, and the evil ones are cast down.
Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice.
Christ is risen, and life is liberated.
Christ is risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead.
For Christ, having risen from the dead, is become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.
To him be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.*

So, what's my point in sharing these images with you? My point is this, now listen close - this is the best thing I've got:

There is absolutely nothing you can do,
Nowhere that you can go,
That Jesus is not coming to you,
And already with you.

Like the Psalmist, we proclaim that there is no darkness, no light, where we can hide from our God. Indeed, even if we make our beds in the depths of Sheol or in the belly of Hades, held captive by death, Jesus is there too.

My point in giving you these stories is that you might leave convinced that there is no distance too great, no sunken valley too deep, for Jesus. When you are in the pit of despair, look to your side, Jesus is already there. When death steals from you the most important thing in your life, look to the one who is already embracing you, weeping alongside.

When you are tempted to despair because the world simply looks too grim, remember this: When death heard the footsteps of Christ approaching, it shuddered in fear, for there was no longer any doubt about the outcome.

All of this adds a bit of color to what Jesus tells the disciples in today's Gospel reading when he says that he will not leave them alone. Perhaps we might even imagine him saying it, something like this:

I am coming to you, no matter where you are.
I will not leave you orphaned because you are mine.
No matter what you have done or what you believe you deserve, I am coming.
I am coming.

Amen.