

APRIL 2, 2010 GOOD FRIDAY

HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD

MATTHEW 27:45-54

WE ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE GOOD FRIDAY EVENTS: THE THREE HOURS ON THE CROSS, THE SEVEN LAST WORDS, THE ENEMIES, AND THE FEW LOVING WITNESSES. WE REMEMBER THE CHARACTERS, THE FRIGHTENED DISCIPLES, AND THE BRAVE JOSEPH OF ARIMETHEA, WHO USED HIS POLITICAL SWAY TO GET JESUS' BODY RELEASED TO HIM FOR PROPER BURIAL. TONIGHT, THOUGH, WE ARE GOING TO TALK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED NEXT. WHAT HAPPENED ON HOLY SATURDAY?

I AM ABOUT TO REMIND YOU OF A TRADITION SELDOM ADDRESSED IN MODERN PROTESTANT SERMONS, ALTHOUGH ALL THE REFORMERS BELIEVED IN WHAT I AM ABOUT TO SAY. THE EASTERN CHURCH, AND I OBSERVED MANY ICONS DEPICTING THIS EVENT, AS WELL AS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH STILL CELEBRATE THE EVENT OF SATURDAY AS DO SOME EPISCOPALIANS AND LUTHERANS. I WILL SAY UP FRONT THAT IT IS A MYSTERIOUS TEACHING AND YET, SCRIPTURE ALLUDES TO IT.

IN FACT, EVERY SUNDAY WE RECITE WHAT WAS THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL PHRASE OF THE CREED. PLACED IN THERE BETWEEN "WAS CRUCIFIED, DIED, AND WAS BURIED" (GOOD FRIDAY) AND "ON THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN" (EASTER) ARE THE STRANGE WORDS: "HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD", THE THEME OF HOLY SATURDAY.

THIS TEACHING COMES FROM PASSAGES AS THE ONE IN MATTHEW TONIGHT, AFTER JESUS BREATHED HIS LAST: "THE TOMBS WERE ALSO OPENED, AND MANY OF THE SAINTS WHO HAD FALLEN ASLEEP WERE RAISED. AFTER HIS RESURRECTION THEY CAME OUT OF THEIR TOMBS...." IN ONE OF HIS SERMONS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS, PETER QUOTES PSALM 16, WHEN EXPLAINING HOW JESUS WAS RAISED, BECAUSE IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR DEATH TO HOLD JESUS UNDER ITS POWER: "FOR YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, OR LET YOUR HOLY ONE EXPERIENCE CORRUPTION." LISTEN TO FIRST PETER (3:19-20): "HE 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.." AND AGAIN (4:6); "FOR THIS IS THE REASON THAT THE GOSPEL WAS PROCLAIMED EVEN TO THE

DEAD, SO THAT, THOUGH THEY HAD BEEN JUDGED IN THE FLESH AS EVERYONE IS JUDGED, THEY MIGHT LIVE IN THE SPIRIT AS GOD DOES”

THE EARLY CHURCH BELIEVED THAT JESUS DESCENDED TO THE DEAD. LATER IN THE REFORMATION, IT WOULD BE CALLED THE HARROWING OF HADES OR THE HARROWING OF HELL. THE WORD “HARRY” MEANT A MILITARY INCURSION. IN OTHER WORDS, JESUS, BEFORE HE ROSE INVADDED THE PLACE OF THE DEAD. THERE HE TRIUMPHED AND RELEASED HELL’S CAPTIVE SOULS.

WHY THIS BELIEF? ONE REASON, WE ARE TOLD IN TRADITION, IS THAT THE RIGHTEOUS WHO HAD DIED BEFORE THE RESURRECTION HAD TO BE SAVED. IT MADE SENSE ACCORDING TO GOD’S JUSTICE AND MERCY THAT THOSE WHO BELIEVED IN GOD BEFORE JESUS CAME DESERVED FORGIVENESS AND ETERNITY. MANY ICONS AND CLASSICAL PAINTINGS DEPICT JESUS RELEASING ADAM AND EVE AS WELL AS THE GREAT PROPHETS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

THEN THERE IS THE DEEP MYSTERY. CHRIST TRULY EXPERIENCING DEATH. IN THE HEBREW FAITH, THE PLACE OF THE DEAD WAS CALLED SHEOL OR THE PIT. IT WAS A DREADFUL PLACE AND DARK PLACE WITH NO LIFE OR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD’S LOVE AND MERCY. IT WAS FEARED AND DREADED.

WHAT WE LEARN IN HOLY WEEK IS THAT, FIRST, JESUS’ FAITH WITHSTOOD EVERYTHING THAT HUMAN EVIL COULD THROW HIS WAY ON THIS EARTH. HE OVERCAME THE MOST TORCHEROUS, BRUTAL TREATMENT MAN COULD DEVISE CULMINATING IN HIS EXECUTION ON THE CROSS AND, YET, STILL FORGAVE HIS ENEMIES.

TRADITION TEACHES US THAT NEXT, JESUS FACED ALL MANNER OF SPIRITUAL EVILS THAT CAUSE DEATH. HE EXPERIENCED TOTAL ABANDONMENT. HE WENT TO THE SPIRITLESS PLACE—THE PLACE OF TOTAL SEPARATION FROM GOD. HE NEEDED TO CONQUER THE FORCES OF DEATH IN ORDER TO RESTORE US TO ETERNAL LIFE. TRADITION SAYS, HE DID IT TO DEFEAT THE POWER OF SATAN AND THE POWER OF DEATH OVER HUMANITY. FROM THEN ON, WHEN WE DIE AS BELIEVERS, WE ARE REDEEMED FROM THE ABODE OF ENDLESS DEATH AND GIVEN ETERNAL LIFE.

NOW YOU MAY BE THINKING. SO WHAT? WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH OUR LIFE HERE? JESUS, CONQUERING EVERYTHING THAT KEEPS US FROM GOD AND ETERNAL LIFE, GIVES US STRENGTH AND HOPE IN THIS LIFE. IT IS THE ROAD OF FAITH THAT LEADS TOWARD NOT FEARING ANYTHING AND THE RELIEF OF GRIEF.

PERHAPS A STORY WILL HELP. IN 1988, AN EARTHQUAKE HIT ARMENIA AND A HIGH-RISE FELL. KEVORK AND HIS WIFE HAD GONE TO WORK. HIS CHILDREN WERE TO GO TO SCHOOL SOON AFTER, WHEN THE FLOOR DISSAPEARED BELOW THEM AND THEY WERE BURIED IN A DARK PIT UNDER TWISTED METAL AND STONE. KEVORK RACED BACK AND BEGAN DIGGING. THEN HE RAN AROUND THE NEIGHBORHOOD LOOKING FOR HELP OR A MACHINE. FOR THREE DAYS THEY DUG. THROUGH IT ALL, ARMEN THE 10 YEAR OLD SON COURAGEOUSLY ENCOURAGED HIS SISTER TO KEEP HOPE. ON THE THIRD DAY, THEY WERE RESCUED, BUT LATER THE BOY WOULD DIE IN THE HOSPITAL. THE GIRL WOULD SURVIVE.

TELLING THIS STORY TO HIS CHRISTIAN FRIEND, VIGEN, THE FATHER SAID: "I HAVE ARGUED WITH GOD DAY AND NIGHT! BUT GOD HAS NOT ANSWERED! ARMEN IS GONE! I WILL GO ON LIVING IN SORROW, BUT I NO LONGER WORRY ABOUT WHAT GOD'S PURPOSES ARE OR WHAT HE WILL DO." KEVORK NO LONGER BELIEVED. HE WAS IN THE DARK PIT.

THERE WAS SILENCE AND THEN KEVORK SAID: "YOU HAVE HEARD OF THE HARE KRISHNA RELIGION? MY NEPHEW BROUGHT ME A BOOK. THERE ARE DRAWINGS OF THE AFTERLIFE AND REINCARNATION. WHEN I WAS YOUNG, WE WERE TAUGHT IN OUR ATHEISM CLASSES THAT MARXISM IS MATERIALISTIC AND REAL AND CHRISTIANITY WAS SPIRITUALIST AND UNREAL. IF THAT IS SO, EXPLAIN TO ME THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ANY OF THIS AND WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS."

HIS FRIEND ASKED IF HE HAD A BIBLE. KEVORK WENT AND GOT ONE. AFTER A WHILE THEY REACHED I CORINTHIANS 15, THE CHAPTER IN WHICH SAINT PAUL STRUGGLES TO EXPLAIN THE NOTION THAT WE WILL ALL LEAVE THESE DEAD BODIES BEHIND AND BE GIVEN A RESURRECTED, HEALED BODY. LIKE THE RISEN JESUS, IT WILL BE MYSTERIOUS. IT WILL BE SPIRITUAL, YET STILL TOUCHABLE. IT WILL BE NEW KIND OF BODY.

KEVORK JUMPED UP AND EXCLAIMED: “CHRISTIANITY IS MATERIALIST! IT SAYS WE WILL HAVE BODIES! I WILL SEE ARMEN’S FACE AGAIN, JUST AS I SEE YOURS IN THE CANDLELIGHT TONIGHT!”

NO OTHER PHILOSOPHY OR RELIGION HAS WHAT CHRISTIANS HAVE THROUGH THE PROMISE. “DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY!” JESUS SHALL TAKE THIS CORRUPTIBLE BODY AND MAKE IT INCORRUPTIBLE.” JESUS VICTORY OVER DEATH WAS NOT JUST ACCOMPLISHED ON THE CROSS ON GOOD FRIDAY AND IN THE RESURRECTION ON EASTER, BUT ALSO ON SATURDAY. THAT DAY, JESUS INVADED AND KNOCKED DOWN THE GATES OF HELL AND LIBERATED THE CAPTIVES WHO ACCEPTED HIM.

ON THAT SATURDAY, THE GOD-MAN, WHO WAS WITHOUT SIN AND WHO RECONCILED ALL PEOPLE TO GOD ON THE CROSS, OVERCOMES THE POWER OF DEATH. IF HE WOULD GO THROUGH THAT DRASTIC, FEARFUL BATTLE FOR US, THEN THERE IS NO DARKNESS IN THIS WORLD THAT COULD EVER OVERTAKE US OR TAKE US FROM HIM. FOR THERE IS NO PLACE IN ALL LEVELS OF REALITY WITHOUT CHRIST’S LIFE, LIGHT, AND LOVE. THIS IS THE ULTIMATE IN GOD’S LOVE AND MERCY. WE ARE SAVED BECAUSE GOD’S PLAN WAS ALWAYS TO HAVE US WITH HIM IN HIS GRACE. AMEN.