

## Jesus Reigns

### The Apostle's Creed, Part 3

***“The third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and dead.”***

This morning I want to focus on that section of *The Apostle's Creed* that says, “The third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and dead.” But before I do, I want us to look at the first asterisk in *The Apostle's Creed*. If you look again at page 881 in the Hymnal, there is an asterisk right after the phrase “was crucified, dead, and buried.” Now look at the bottom of the page. It says “Traditional use of this creed includes these words: ‘he descended into hell.’”

That phrase was placed into the Creed because the early Christians did not understand the difference between hell and the Hebrew word Sheol, which means “the grave.” It was the place of death; hell was the place of punishment. When “descended into hell” was inserted into the Creed, the tradition developed of believing that Christ had descended into hell to lead the souls of the condemned people out. Jesus did not descend into hell, but the Sheol, or the grave. The point of the Creed was to say that Jesus had died totally. This error was corrected several hundred years later. The footnote to the Creed about Jesus descending into hell is for historical purposes.

So, now back to that portion of *The Apostle's Creed* we are looking at today. “The third day he rose from the dead.” Jesus died on the Jewish Sabbath, on Friday. He was in the tomb for three days, until Sunday. The term “resurrection” means a return to life from death. Jesus had predicted his own death and resurrection, and now it became a reality. All four gospels plus 1 Corinthians 15 attest to it. Many seem to find resurrection a difficult concept to accept. Logic tells us that when you are dead, you are dead, and that's it. Not so for God, and also not so for us, but we will deal with that in two weeks.

Some skeptics point to the differing accounts of Jesus' resurrection as proof that doubt is warranted. I believe exactly the opposite. We need to remember that the gospels were all written 30 to 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Time clouds the memory of details. If the disciples had been intent on fabricating a story that Jesus had been resurrected, they would have conferred and ensured their stories all matched, which they do not. We believe that through God's inspiration, the four gospels together form the complete story.

What is the evidence of Christ's resurrection? Three things. First, the tomb was found empty by no less than four of Jesus' followers. Second, he reappeared ten times in ten different places, including Mary in the garden, ten in the Upper Room, the ten again plus Thomas, to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee, and more than 500 others. Third, the disciples' attitudes were incredibly changed by the event. Whereas before they had abandoned Jesus, including Peter's overt denial of him, now they believed and were ready to move out on behalf of the kingdom. At Pentecost they were commissioned to spend the rest of their lives preaching the good news and building the church.

Forty days after Jesus' resurrection came his ascension into heaven as described in Acts 1:1-11. Jesus rose in a cloud, symbolizing the presence of God. Two angels immediately promised the disciples that Jesus would return. Why didn't Jesus just ascend right after his resurrection? Because he needed that time to do some follow-up work with the disciples, preparing them to receive the Holy Spirit.

*The Apostle's Creed* affirms that Jesus was then seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. The early church knew full well that God was not in bounded form, sitting on a throne, and that Jesus was not literally sitting at his right hand. They also knew that Jesus and God were one. But the allegory is a useful one. In Jewish tradition, the father of the family always blessed the eldest son using his right hand. Jesus himself drew on this imagery, saying he would rise to be at the Father's right hand. To think of Jesus at God's right hand is to acknowledge his preeminence over all things.

Then *The Apostle's Creed* then says, "from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." The word "quick" is an old term meaning the "living." The Creed affirms that Jesus is Lord of the living as well as the dead, that we are being judged during our lifetime and we will be judged at the end of it.

This is one aspect of God that many of us gloss over. We don't want to think of being judged by Christ, simply because we all know we are sinners. Instead, we would prefer to think of a meek and mild Jesus, a Jesus who forgives and is merciful. And so he is when our hearts are truly repentant and we commit ourselves to giving up our sinful ways.

But the New Testament is insistent on the judgment of God. John the Baptist in Matthew 3:12 speaks of Jesus when he says, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Jesus himself spoke of his coming judgment in the parable of the wheat and tares in Matthew 13. It is a story that says evil is allowed to exist in the world because uprooting it would mean the end of the growing time for good as well. But the time is coming, Jesus says, when the Son of God will return for the eternal harvest, and when he does, every person, living and dead, will be called into judgment.

How do we stand in the face of diving judgment? How can we be worthy? By following Christ, by living life by his standards and his example. It really is that simple. Let me illustrate. Gerda Weissman Klein, a Jewess, was in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. Most people, she said, think of the camps as snake pits, places of extreme hardship and suffering that drove people to step on each other to survive. But it wasn't like that all, she related. There was much kindness and understanding among the prisoners. Gerda had a young friend named Ilse, a Polish Christian. One day Ilse found a raspberry in the camp. She carried it in her pocket all day long and that night presented it to Gerda on a leaf. Gerda wrote, "Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you present it to your friend." Christ would bless such a gift. When he returns to judge the world and separate the wheat from the chaff, he will remember Ilse for her kindness.

Let me put this another way. Resurrection people are happy people. They know that God is in charge of the universe, that eventually all his promises will be fulfilled, and there will be a "new heaven and a new earth." Resurrection people have their sorrows, to be sure. They are no more immune to suffering than other people. They may even suffer more. But deep down they are happy, for they know that the end of the story is not tragedy. It ends, rather, in romance – the story of love between an Almighty Father, his Son, and us. Resurrection people know that in the end, the Lord Jesus will rule over everything. And that indeed is worth being happy about.

The apostle Paul said it well in Philippians 2:9-11 when he wrote, "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

In a word, Jesus reigns! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 27 March 2011