

What is your greatest fear? Usually, we go to phobias - which by definition are irrational. But what *really* keeps you up at night? Fear for your safety or the safety of your family? Wondering how to make ends meet? Insecurities about your job performance, or maybe your abilities as a friend, spouse, or parent?

I want to talk about power and weakness. We spend a lot of our lives trying to minimize risk, to protect ourselves, to keep from being vulnerable.

We're vulnerable. We don't like to admit that. And we want to *avoid* that vulnerability. We want to protect ourselves and those we love.

But to be human is to risk. We're not fully human unless we are vulnerable. If you teach your child to walk, they're going to fall down. If you send them into the world, they're going to get hurt. You **COULD** just never give them any power of their own - never teach them to walk or speak or feed themselves or educate them in any way. You could exercise full authority over them and keep them safe.

But to take away their power like that is to keep them from being fully human. In fact, the only way to raise a child well is to give them power, which then opens them to risk. To deny someone power, to take away their God-given authority to act in the world is to deny their humanity.

We can't exercise our God-given authority in the world unless we choose to be vulnerable as well. Following God means choosing to risk, to open ourselves to God, to our neighbors, to the world. That's scary, but God is bigger than our fears. Today is not about avoiding risk, but embracing risk and trusting that God is faithful to bring life when *we* are faithful to follow his calling on us.

## **Message**

This summer, we're working through the Apostle's Creed, one of the oldest statements about what Christians believe. These beliefs are not gateways to belonging but invitations to life. When we say, "I believe..." we are acting in faith, trusting the wisdom of the Church across the world and throughout time that has found these words to be the Way of God, the way to life.

We began by confessing God as our creator, insisting that our lives have meaning and purpose. Since then, we've been investigating belief in Jesus - that he is both fully God and fully human. Last week, Debbie explored why Jesus died on the cross and was buried - that Jesus' death frees us from the sin that has us trapped.

Today, we're exploring the strangest line in the Creed: **We believe Jesus descended to Hell.**

This line is sometimes also rendered, "he descended to hades" or "to the dead". Some denominations actually omit this line when they say the creed (our sister denomination the United Methodists dropped the line about 100 years ago).

The line comes between our confession of Jesus' death and his resurrection... He was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to Hell. The third day he rose again from the dead.

So this 'descent to Hell' is what Jesus was doing between the time he died on the Cross on Good Friday and was raised to life on Easter Sunday. Jesus spent Saturday in Hell.

We should be clear about what exactly the Creed is saying here, because the early Christians didn't think of Hell as this place of eternal torture where all the bad people went when they died (with the devils in red spandex laughing and poking us with pitchforks).

For Jews and early Christians, when you died, you went to a place they most commonly called 'the grave'. In Hebrew, it's Sheol; and in Greek, it's 'Hades'. It was basically where everyone waited until the resurrection and final judgment. They thought of the Underworld as a place below the ground - they called it the 'depths of the Earth'. And of course the Underworld is sealed by gates, locked from the outside. And the keys were held by the forces of evil and chaos.

So when the early Christians said, "We believe Jesus descended to Hell," they were saying they believe Jesus was all the way dead. Not Miracle Max's "mostly dead". All the way dead. Fully dead. Trapped inside the Grave, the gates locked from the outside.

All this talk of the Grave is an ancient way of expressing grief over the inevitability and power of Death. One Biblical author calls Death the 'final enemy'. Death is the ultimate vulnerability, when all of our authority, power and agency are removed forever. Death is what haunts us from the first moment we hurt ourselves and realize our lives have an expiration date. As parents, that first moment you realize exactly how vulnerable your child is, you want to exercise all your power to keep them safe, to protect them from anything that could hurt them.

But a fully human life, one free of sin, is characterized by both authority *and* vulnerability. It's not about protection but risk.

Of course it was exactly this vulnerability that got Jesus killed. He refused to fight back, refused to protect himself, even to the end.

The powers of Evil saw this man who would not participate in their oppressive ways. They could not convince him to chase a throne. They could not convince him to hoard his wealth. They could not convince him to flaunt his divine powers. He would not play their authority game in ways big or small. Instead, he offered authority to the vulnerable and challenged those in power to open themselves to risk.

So they killed him. They deployed their ultimate weapon, the one inevitable horror we all know is waiting for us: Death.

The Cross is a singular act of faithfulness: Jesus knew that a fully human life is found in risk, in vulnerability. And he never backed away from that, even as his death got closer and closer. Instead he had *faith*. Faith that God's way leads to life. Faith that God would not abandon him. He refused to use his power, to summon the armies of Heaven to conquer his enemies.

Jesus was crucified. And he descended to the dead. He wasn't mostly dead. He was all the way dead. Locked inside the gates of the underworld, trapped with all humanity.

Which, it turns out, was the plan all along.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Ephesians 4. In the letter to the Ephesians, the author quotes a Psalm to illustrate what happened when Jesus died and descended to the dead. His logic is a little hard to follow, but it's fun. As you're turning there, I'm going to read the central bit and then we'll work through from the beginning of the chapter.

Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;  
he gave gifts to his people.”

(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) -- Ephesians 4:8-10 (NRSV)

The Psalm claims that when 'he' ascended, he made captivity itself a captive. The original Psalm is a victory Psalm, celebrating God's ultimate victory over the other gods. The author of Ephesians does something pretty brilliant here...

[Jesus' path of descending] He claims that Jesus' ascension is actually a *descension*. Jesus began in Heaven as God's Son. Then he became human. Then he submitted to death. And then he descended to the grave. He went all the way from the top to the very bottom of creation.

And the writer of Ephesians insists that by descending like this, he conquered everyone... even Death, the ultimate captivity from whom no one escapes.

If this were an action movie, this would be the moment where the villains think they've won. They've defeated the hero and dragged him in chains back to their secret base and locked him in the deepest dungeon. Except the hero just laughs and laughs because his plan all along was to go to the very heart of his enemy's power. And suddenly we see that by bringing him back here, they've actually defeated themselves (he has a bomb or something).

[Harrowing of Hell] In Christian tradition, this moment is called the Harrowing of Hell, and it's been represented in icons for centuries. Because what happens when Jesus descends to the dead is that he defeats the powers of Evil and Death *from the inside out*. He blows the doors of the grave from the

inside out. That's why the icon has Jesus grabbing onto a very surprised Adam and Eve and lifting them from their graves.

By dying, Jesus defeated Death. By descending, he took captivity itself captive. (And next week, when we talk about resurrection, we'll be talking about what happens when he ascends!)

But... ultimately... so what? Why does it actually *matter* whether Jesus descended to the dead or not? What does it mean for the Church to confess, "We believe Jesus descended to the dead"?

Practically speaking, it means we embrace the path of vulnerability in our everyday lives. We ask how we can risk for the sake of other people. How we can choose not to fight, but to embrace. This is what Ephesians challenges us to do - go back to the beginning of chapter 4:

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.

However, he has given each one of us a special gift through the generosity of Christ. That is why the Scriptures say,

"When he ascended to the heights,  
he led a crowd of captives  
and gave gifts to his people."

Notice that it says "he ascended." This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world. And the same one who descended is the one who ascended higher than all the heavens, so that he might fill the entire universe with himself.

For the writer of Ephesians, Jesus' model of vulnerability means we have to imitate him. Be humble and gentle. Patient. Make allowances for each others' faults (how would this change your marriage? Your relationships with your coworkers?). Make *every effort* to remain united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.

Friends, that is a difficult calling. That takes a lot of risk, a lot of vulnerability. Which is why, right about the time you start to push back and say, "I don't think I can do that...", the text says, "When he ascended, he also descended."

Because this insistent vulnerability only happens when we follow Jesus. This risky business of Church only happens IN the Spirit. We can't do this on our own. We need Jesus' example. We need Jesus' power. We need Jesus' Spirit.

Ephesians tells us that God has given us gifts - that these gifts come specifically through Jesus' descent to the dead. Ephesians goes on to explain what these gifts are all out:

Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. -- Ephesians 4:1-16 (NLT)

What it means to insist that Jesus descended to the dead is that we insist we are one Church, united not by Jesus' power but by his vulnerability. His sacrifice brings us together and gives us all gifts.

To insist Jesus descended to the dead is to insist you have a gift I need, and I have a gift you need. It's to insist we need each other, and unless we're both vulnerable, we're both missing out.

I have to tell you, I have found this to be so true in the last few months. I have had a surprising (to me) amount of anxiety and self-doubt. Questioning my ability to pastor, whether I have anything to offer.

What has saved me week after week has been the Church. Catalyst. No matter how anxious I'm feeling, when this moment begins, when we gather and sing together and I stand here and I see you, I know this is exactly where God has called me.

When I sit across a table from you, pray with you, see how you serve in the countless ways you respond to God's calling, I am refreshed, renewed and affirmed. Truly, the way you use the gifts God has given you is a ministry to me. You are a fountain of living water and I have lately been in need of refreshment.

I know Catalyst is good for you because Catalyst is good for me. I know I can be vulnerable because you are vulnerable with me. You allow me into your homes, your lives, your stories.

Friends, we were created to be vulnerable. To risk. To refuse any authority that comes without vulnerability. It is difficult. But it is what makes us human. It is how God created us to live.

Friends, this is what we are called to: the path of vulnerability. We believe Jesus descended to the dead. He demonstrated what a vulnerable life looks like and invites us to follow him into the grave, trusting that God is faithful, that God will always bring life.

### **Communion + Creed**

[Communion Slide] We follow Jesus faithfully down, down, down. We trust God will bring resurrection.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.  
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.  
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.  
I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

### **Assignment + Blessing**

Sacred Reading of Ephesians 4:1-16

How can you risk, choose to be vulnerable this week?