

# THE HARROWING OF HELL

## Matthew 27:50-54 NRSV

<sup>50</sup> Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>51</sup> At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. <sup>52</sup> The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. <sup>53</sup> After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many.

## 1 Peter 3:18-19 NRSV

<sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered<sup>[a]</sup> for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you<sup>[b]</sup> to God. He was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,

## 1 Peter 4:6 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> For this is the reason 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.

## From "The Last Week"

1. Intensely Jewish Christian tradition. (*Did not remain in the tradition, probably because as more Gentiles came to the faith, it wasn't necessary to resurrect the Hebrew ancestors, i.e. what about the Gentiles?--my theory*)
2. Intensely Mythological, three linked motifs
  - a. Deception (*Satan is allowed to crucify Jesus, unaware of the consequences*)
  - b. Descent (*actual reason for his death and burial*)
  - c. Despoiling (*Jesus breaks open the prison of hell and releases both himself and all the righteous ones who preceded him in death*)
3. Doesn't fit easily into any of the Gospel sequences, (*however, they all disagree with each other as to timing and events.--my words*)
4. Some theologians dismiss altogether, due to an assumption (*not a Christian doctrine*) that all Christians need to be baptized in order to enter heaven.





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The concept of Jesus proclaiming liberty to the captives in hell, the "harrowing of hell" is held in early manuscripts, and three New Testament passages. It is also found in early 2nd century hymns, and in the artwork displayed in this handout.

These paintings can be found in Coptic, and in Eastern Orthodox churches in Egypt and Turkey.

Christ is usually depicted with feet apart and His robes positioned in a way to depict swift movement.

Adam, and in some images, with Eve, is being pulled up with Christ, symbolizing His



victory in redeeming all of mankind, restoring the image of man after the fall in Paradise, returning Adam and all humankind to their renewed state.

Kings and Prophets from the Old Testament are depicted as well.

Some artists depict Christ's feet at the broken gates of Hades; you sometimes find broken keys and shackles, as well as Satan bound and defeated.

