

BYZANTINE CATHOLIC EPARCHY OF PASSAIC



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CHRIST IS RISEN! INDEED HE IS RISEN!

The Harrowing of Hades

After a bitterly cold winter in the north, the blessed warmth of spring has arrived. The snow is melting, and the damp earth is exposed, soon to be broken by new plants pushing through to the surface. The dead branches of trees are covered, first with tiny red points, and then green buds, and finally fresh leaves, as if they were dressing for a party—the feast of Easter, the feast of the Lamb.

Without the winter, we don't appreciate the spring, and without facing death, we don't feel the full joy of the resurrection.

"Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again; for forgiveness has risen from he grave." How comforting are these words in the winter of our sins, whether truly deadly ones that make us weep for risking our eternal salvation, or the soul-numbing habitual sins that wear us down year after year with discouragement. Like snow and ice, sin seems beautiful through a window, and like the cold, it saps our strength and deprives us of life without protection. There is a phenomenon called paradoxical undressing. When people are freezing to death, they sometimes start removing their clothes because they feel extremely hot. A man in New Jersey was found in that state this winter. And so it is with anyone who is completely given over to evil—he believes himself righteous and confidently tears off all protection, sneering at everyone else. But for those who have been touched by evil and escaped, the memory of looking over the cliff and being gently pulled back by the loving hand of God is a memory of comfort and relief as well as overwhelming humility. Let no one mourn who has fallen again and again; for forgiveness, that is, Jesus has risen from the grave.

What kind of sadness do you live with? Is it pain in the flesh, a health problem that will never get better, or just old age that overtakes us all? Or is it the pain of the family, the loss of loved ones, or fighting and division? Or is it loneliness, or a feeling that life has no purpose or nothing ever gets better? Regret over lost opportunities? An unkind word to your husband or wife that you can't take back?

Easter is your feast day to rejoice! For Jesus took all of these things on himself, and when he sacrificed himself on the cross as both victim and high priest, "surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows, ... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

There is a passage in Isaiah that describes the descent into the underworld of the King of Babylon when he is dead. It says that Hades is in a commotion, and all the dead kings get up off their thrones to greet him, and

remind him that he has lost all his earthly splendor. It's a passage that ridicules this one time master of the world. Just as Jesus Christ turned everything upside down, St. John Chrysostom turns that passage upside down, and makes it a prophecy of the descent of Jesus into Hades. Like the King of Babylon, Jesus has lost everything on the cross, his dignity, his friends, his followers, his flesh, and finally his life. And when Jesus descends into Hades, all the dead stand up to greet him, but not to mock him as they mocked the King of Babylon, but to hear the Good News. As St. Peter tells us in his first Epistle, Christ went in the Spirit to preach to the spirits in prison.

Imagine the joy that those souls must have felt in the underworld—Adam and Eve who spent thousands of years watching their children and grandchildren arrive in the underworld, weighed down with their own sins and the sin of Adam and Eve—Moses who saw his students arriving in the underworld, condemned because they didn't listen to his admonition—David who saw his kingdom divided and his sheep carried off by lions and his house ravaged all because of his own adultery and murder. But then a change of mood when St. Joseph arrives, according to our hymns, he tells Isaiah, "Your prophecy is fulfilled, the Virgin has given birth." And he tells King David, "Rejoice, for God has kept his promise to you—your son and your Lord is taking his throne for all eternity." And finally, after the Crucifixion with its mighty earthquake, the Creator of Life itself arrives to take his saints to the new promised land. Imagine the joy when preached to the spirits in prison.

King David prophesied in Psalm 15(16), "For you will not leave my soul in Hades, you will not allow your holy one to undergo corruption." King David was talking about himself, but he did stay in Hades, and his body did decay. Then, with the entrance into the underworld of Jesus, Son of David, King David was restored; he was not left in Hades. But he also was prophesying about Jesus Christ himself, his soul did not stay in Hades, and his body did not undergo corruption.

Speaking in Jerusalem after he cured the man born blind, Jesus said, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." And Jesus did lay down his life for us, his sheep. And then he said, "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No man takes it away from me: but I lay it down of myself, and I have power to lay it down: and I have power to take it up again." Rejoice today, all you mortals! For Jesus has laid down his life, destroying the power of evil and all of its offspring, paying the price for our sins, throwing hell into an uproar.

Rejoice all people! For the winter of our sins is over, the warmth of spring is melting the deathly ice. The damp ground is moving—pushed aside by new life, as the green plants come out of the underworld and reach towards the light. Our burdens are lifted, our chains are unlocked, and the doors of our prison are flung open. Rejoice and walk into the new spring with Christ!