

„Crucified, dead and buried, descended into the realm of death“ -  
How very true, at least in empirical respects. And otherwise?(WM Erik  
Nau)

23:50 Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph who, though a member of the council, 51 had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. 52 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. 54 It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. 55 The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. 24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3 but when they went in they did not find the body. (NRSVue 2021).

Crucified, dead and buried, descended into the realm of the death - this passage from the Apostles' Creed is the motto for today's service. I have chosen the passage from the Gospel of Luke about Jesus' tomb, which begins with a certain Joseph of Arimathea, as a fitting text.

In many churches, there is a tradition of telling jokes during the sermon on Easter Sunday to make the listeners laugh and thus express their joy at the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One well-known Easter joke centres on Joseph of Arimathea, and just in case you haven't heard it yet, I'll tell it briefly:

On Friday evening, Joseph comes home completely exhausted. His wife is already waiting for him. 'Where have you been for so long again?' she asks angrily. Joseph replies: "I am sorry, but I still had to bury Jesus of Nazareth. I just put him in our family tomb." His wife gets even angrier: "Tell me, Joseph, are you completely crazy? Tombs cost a fortune! We'll never find another one in such a good place! And anyway, where should we be buried now? Should I bury you in the nearest sand pit when you kick the bucket? And anyway, how come you don't even ask me before you give our beautiful family tomb to a complete stranger -" Joseph interrupts her: 'Oh, don't worry, darling, it's only for three days!'

You can find such a joke funny or tasteless, but one thing is certain: it only works because, in terms of salvation history, we live in post-Easter times and project our perspective onto Joseph. We also hear about the women who come to the tomb and we already know roughly what will happen: They no longer find Jesus, even though they expect to find a dead man. The Gospel goes on to tell us that Jesus is not dead, but alive as the risen Christ. This is the perspective with which we usually hear the Passion and Easter narratives of the Gospels, and it is this context that gives them their meaning. And yet texts such as today's Gospel are composed to make something else very clear: Jesus is, first of all, really dead.

And this brings us back to the passage in the creed: 'Crucified, dead and buried' - these are probably the most undisputed facts of Jesus' life, which are even reported by non-biblical

sources. The resurrection is then the subject of the Gospel literature. And in order to make clear the reality of Jesus' resurrection, the Gospels, like Luke here, use descriptions of how Jesus is treated as a dead man - how his body is prepared for burial and how the women in the text serve as witnesses that he is actually laid in the tomb. Then a whole day passes, Saturday and the Sabbath, which is intended to demonstrate: Anyone who has been dead for over a day and a half was hardly just briefly unconscious, or perhaps in a momentary delirium, only to suddenly regain consciousness and stroll away - then again endowed with so much strength that he can roll the heavy stone away from the grave to get out of there in the first place...

No, this text was written so that those who hear it should believe: Jesus' resurrection must be true, because so was his death.

The history of Christianity and thus also the history of theology has long been characterised by disputes about whether Jesus' tomb was empty or not, and what this means for the resurrection of Jesus.

What is its reality and quality? All theories have been put forward, from supernatural miracles to tall tales, and entire lectures could be held just on this subject. Let us therefore leave this topic aside for the time being. Before the resurrection, however we imagine it, comes the rest in the tomb. It is a time of emptiness that can characterise Holy Saturday, for example in church liturgies.

This Holy Saturday atmosphere has its origins in the fact that we put ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' disciples. They knew nothing of the fact that Jesus' resurrection was imminent, but probably felt that their discipleship was coming to a definitive end, sensed the failure of their life's work, and perhaps even regretted all the losses and sacrifices they had made in their lives with Jesus in recent years. All of this was probably mixed with the grief for the loved one who had been so close to them. A day of overwhelming emptiness, because Jesus was now missing - as a person, but also as God's physical presence in the world.

One could naively ask: *What did Jesus 'do' during this time? Or: Where was he?* The Creed gives the answer: He descended into the realm of the death.

We recognise a symbolic language here that has its equivalent in ideas of 'heaven'. Behind this is an ancient worldview prevalent at the time, which separates the *world of the living* from a *sphere of the dead*, which is located below the earth, and from a divine sphere above the earth, in heaven. A strongly negative evaluation of this sphere of the dead as a place of atonement or the torments of hell only developed later, and it would also not make sense to locate Jesus, who was regarded as sinless, there in order to undergo punishment for his sins. This paragraph of the creed can be interpreted in different ways, but I am convinced by the following argument: just as the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ underpin the fact that he is both true man and true God, the statement about descending into the realm of death also points to an attribute of Jesus Christ that should be handed down: he is the Pantocrator, the ruler of the whole world. His power does not end at the threshold of the world of the dead, but reaches into it as well as into the heavenly powers and the world of the living - still

rooted in ancient ideas. If you pause here in the creed, you may already sense something of the triumph that must come next, and which soon showed the disciples new perspectives.

But what can this passage still say to us today, to those of us who have left the ancient worldview behind us and can, with more or less difficulty, still perceive and understand the symbolism behind it? One of the purposes of the creed is to reaffirm one's own faith, but does a 'crucified, dead and buried, descended into the realm of death' help this faith?

I think it is remarkable that Jesus, *even Jesus himself*, is confronted with a reality that no human being can escape, namely death. Death has its place even in Jesus' life and hits his fellow human beings with full force. Nevertheless, for those who have heard about it since then, his death, *indeed his very death*, has always been a sign of his resurrection and is inseparably linked to it. This symbol of *death, in which there is life*, is very meaningful to me, because the human reality of my life can be brought together with the hope of resurrection when I consider the analogy to Jesus' death in his humanity. Jesus' brief, almost demonstrative pause in death, as illustrated by the Creed and the Gospel, helps me not to repress death, but to give it space in its ambivalence. The ambivalent feelings associated with it, such as pain, grief, shock, anger, relief and even redemption, are allowed, because it is the end and yet not the absolute end in following Jesus. God's power works in Jesus through death into new life - however that may be. This does not mean glorifying death or devaluing life. It gives me hope with regard to my own end of life that I can trust God's work in my life until death – the work of the God who knows suffering, death and the realm of the death, but who has overcome all of this.

And the peace of God, which is higher than our reason, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.