

Last week, we looked at Jesus’ resurrection and how He revealed Himself alive and well to His followers. This week, we will look at what Jesus is doing now and what He’ll do when He returns.

After Jesus rose on the third day, Easter Sunday, He spent the next forty days appearing to His followers at many various places and times of His choosing. By the end of those forty days, His followers were convinced that He was alive. And His resurrection changed their outlook on their earthly lives. They were ***so convinced*** that Jesus was alive and had conquered death that they were all willing to be martyred - put to death - for their faith. In fact, of the Twelve, only John the brother of James was not executed for proclaiming the work of Jesus Christ. But he was exiled to the Greek island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea because of his testimony about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Twelve, now known as Apostles or those specially ***sent out*** by Jesus to bear witness about Him, knew and believed that Jesus was the Lord of life and death. They knew their present earthly lives were short and after death a glorious eternal life awaited them. That is why they were willing to suffer and die for the sake of Christ Jesus because they knew they were safe in His hands and He would keep His promise to raise them when He returns to perfectly restore His creation.

Well, on the fortieth day after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven. But He didn’t retire; He simply began a new phase of His work. Instead of abandoning His disciples, He came to them in the Holy Spirit and through His Word and Sacraments. And working through His believers, He continues His work. He is present throughout His entire creation, and He continues His work of saving and proclaiming the Gospel through His Church.

Ten days after His Ascension, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on His faithful. It was the Festival of Pentecost, an Old Testament festival established in the Book of Leviticus. Pentecost was the annual celebration of the first of two harvests in the land of Israel. These two harvests came to represent the beginning and the end of the New Testament Church. You could also think of them as bookends. The first harvest, the first bookend, was that Pentecost day fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection. The second harvest, the second bookend will be when Christ returns at the end of this age.

On that Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection and ten days after His ascension, the Holy Spirit entered the faithful and gave them great courage and strength. With boldness, the twelve apostles and other Christians proclaimed Jesus’ saving work in front of the very same people from whom

they had hidden in terror those days after Jesus' crucifixion. And the first harvest of souls began as three thousand were baptized and added to their number on Pentecost Day itself.

The twelve apostles played a foundational role in the Christian Church. Guided by the Holy Spirit, they taught the faith, oversaw others who taught, and went to various places as missionaries. But their greatest contribution was writing and overseeing the writing of the Gospels and the other books that make up the New Testament.

Today, all faithful pastors and Christian teachers teach under the authority of the Apostolic Scriptures, the New Testament. Those books judge what is truth and what is error in the Church. It was these writings that led Martin Luther to recognize the errors that had crept into the Roman Catholic Church over the years.

But all the time, it is Jesus continuing His ministry, His prophet role through His Church. Using His Scriptures - both Old and New Testaments - He teaches us about God and His Kingdom. He calls us to repent of our sin and return to Him, He confronts error and purifies the teaching in His Church. He makes disciples, baptizing and teaching them through Word and Sacraments. He forgives our sins, strengthens us in our weakness, comforts us in our grief and sorrow, and assures us of His return and the glorious, eternal life that awaits us in His new heavens and new earth.

Jesus also continues His Priestly role. All His work is tied to the cross where, as our High Priest, He offered Himself as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. Now He sits at the right hand of God the Father interceding for us. He brings our needs before our heavenly Father who loves us and graciously provides all our needs for Jesus' sake.

Jesus also is the King of Israel. Like David, He protects us from our enemies, governs His Church, and directs everything that happens in all His creation for the good of His people.

When we die, He brings our spirit to be with Him in paradise to await the resurrection. For a long time, Christians focused on that view of heaven - forever floating on the clouds strumming our harps in an endless church service. But Scripture makes it clear that this is not the end of the story. We human beings were created to be spirits living in a physical body. No matter how wonderful it is to be in paradise in the presence of Christ, the heavenly Father, and the glorious angels, we will still not be complete until Jesus raises our body, and our spirit inhabits it once again-not returning to this same frail body that is vulnerable to sickness and injury, aging, and death. But our spirit

returning to this same body made new, powerful, immortal, completely intact for all eternity.

That restoration will be made on Judgment Day. Jesus will return in great power and glory with His angel armies. He will raise all the dead without fail. It doesn't matter if that body lies frozen at the summit of Mount Everest, entombed in a ship at the bottom of the ocean, vaporized in an explosion, or cremated with the ashes spread across the ocean. Christ will raise every dead person.

Then all the resurrected will stand before Christ for public judgment. Those who rejected Him and lived for themselves will be banished to hell forever.

Just a few short notes about hell.

First, the Bible is clear that God never wanted humans to wind up in hell for all eternity. God prepared hell for the fallen angels who aligned themselves with Satan and rebelled against God. God had a different destiny in mind for the children of Adam and Eve. All their sins were completely paid in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. He wants all people to enjoy eternal life through faith in Jesus. He truly offers that salvation to all, but those who reject that salvation rightly deserve eternal punishment.

God makes that clear in the Old Testament as well as the New: "As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33:11)

If you have trouble bringing together the idea of a loving God creating a place like hell, then remember God is also holy and perfectly just. If your dear loved one was murdered by a vicious criminal, how would you feel if the judge or jury set the murderer free because they thought sitting in a jail was cruel? God considers not only the sinner but also the victims of the sins those sinners commit. God is absolutely just and right, but He shows His great love and mercy by providing a way for every sinner, even the vilest sinner, to escape hell - His Son's cross. Jesus carried every sin of every sinner and paid that debt in full to God the Father.

Thanks be to God that the Spirit has created saving faith in us, leading us to recognize our guilt and that we deserve to spend eternity in hell but won't **have** to because Jesus suffered it for us. He has given us His perfection and righteousness that we may live with Him in heaven. In the last Book of the Bible, Revelation, the Apostle John describes that great day in our future: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had

passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:1-4)

By the way, when God raises our bodies and removes the effect of sin from them - injury, suffering, aging, and death - He will also purge the sinful nature from our spirit, heart, soul, and mind. We will be absolutely pure and holy, loving and delighting in one another through all eternity. And about those people you have the most difficulty being with here on earth? When Christ removes their sinful nature and yours, they will be a great delight to be with and to share eternity together. Think of it - to be loved, accepted, appreciated, enjoyed, and to belong - that is our eternal future because of Jesus Christ.

And the new creation that surrounds us will be a complete delight. Think of your favorite place to be in this world - an ocean beach, a mountain top, a desert, a lake, a prairie - you will feel that delight and enjoy that beauty throughout the new creation.

And you'll interact with angels, seeing them, enjoying their presence, admiring their unceasing loyalty to God and their faithful service to faithless, difficult people like us through this lifetime. But greatest of all, we will bask in the glory of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who shines upon us from His royal throne or stands alongside us or walks and talks with us as He walked and talked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Truly, that is the greatest part of eternity - to be in the presence of our Creator as He eternally fills our hearts and minds. That is our future, through Jesus Christ our Lord. To Him alone be all glory and honor. Amen.