

Holy Saturday in a harrowing time

Christ harrows hell, and nowhere are we beyond the hand that holds that harrow.

by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [March 24, 2021](#) issue



The Resurrection of Christ and the Harrowing of Hell, Russian, ca.17th century
(Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)

A harrow is a spiked implement that is drawn over plowed land to break up clods, tear up weeds, and level the ground for planting. Knowing that bit of agricultural technology gives our figurative use of the adjective *harrowing* an important layer of meaning. When we speak of a harrowing experience, we mean one that is hair-raising and unnerving, one that disturbs our peace and challenges our sense of security. Whatever in us remains to be broken up and rooted out so that we may be made fertile and fruitful may need to be harrowed. It is not likely to be a comfortable process.

One of the hopes I brought into 2021 was that the harrowing experiences so many of us went through during a year of pandemic and political upheaval might make our common ground ready for new, more fruitful, more equitable ways of doing things:

providing education and health care while making institutions more flexible, leadership more agile, and government more responsive and responsible. I hoped the pain we shared and witnessed might help break up the clots of greed and tear out the roots of warmongering triumphalism, break open our hearts, and leave us receptive to seeds of change scattered by a divine hand. Many died in the harrowing months of 2020. Many were pepper sprayed in the streets. Many banners were inscribed with insistent calls for change. That change, when it comes, will have exacted a great cost.

The early church doctrine of the harrowing of hell—the belief that in between his death and resurrection Christ descended to hell and burst its very gates to redeem the dead—is not in the Gospel record. But it makes complete sense given what he came to earth to do: restore our frayed relationship with the source of life, open his arms wide in hard-won forgiveness, and call all people out of darkness into divine light.

All people, of all times and places. A God who is not bound by time would not be bound by the pastness of the past. And if the message of the gospel is that death has been conquered, a gathering of the dead into the great now of the kingdom of heaven would seem a fitting completion of that promise and fact.

The Triduum, those three days in which we commemorate the final journey from the Mount of Olives to the open tomb, makes the past liturgically present. The liturgy of Good Friday takes us through the painful moments on the way of the cross—the mockery, the scourging, the stumblings, the humiliations, the final relinquishment. Easter Sunday is all celebration of the resurrection that enabled us once and for all to live out our journeys here in what the Book of Common Prayer calls “sure and certain hope.”

And Holy Saturday brings the harrowing of hell into our present time. That strange, haunting day after the crucifixion and before the resurrection focuses not only on the empty altar and the appalling fact of what happened when humankind rejected love but also on the depth and breadth of that love. Christ stretched out his arms on the cross in an embrace that encircled the world; he also descended to hell itself to lift all of humankind into that now.

I have long loved Psalm 139 for its exuberant confidence, but especially for the reassurance in verses 7–10:

Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

In older translations, the Hebrew term for the place of the dead, *Sheol*, is translated as “hell.” I like that translation; it seems appropriately jarring. Besides which, the idea that I might make my bed in hell is a strong reminder that I am capable of doing just that—convincing myself that I can be happy and at home in the squalor of gluttony, lust, sloth, avarice, and the whole list of other habits that keep one self-focused and afraid.

But the place of which the psalmist speaks is also a place, thank God, that is pathetically ramshackle and offers no protection from the “hound of heaven”—Francis Thompson’s image for the Spirit who hunts us down to bring us home. Thompson’s long, unsettling, but strangely reassuring poem of that title begins with words in which I imagine many of us might recognize an element of our own stories:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.

The poem continues, a narrative of flight and pursuit by “those strong Feet that followed, followed after.” It ends with a triumphant invitation to the captive, “Rise, clasp My hand and come!” and an accusation so kind it serves as a word of welcome: “Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, / I am He whom thou seekest!”

God, the poem suggests, hunts us down with a divine love that is fierce and urgent. Not a predator but a “tremendous lover,” God seeks us to make us safe and to free us from our own fears. God will follow us anywhere—“adown Titanic glooms of

chasmed fears” and “across the margin of the world.” The God of the Psalms will follow us to the farthest limits of the sea and into Sheol itself, equipped, like a farmer who knows life depends on it, with a harrow.

Nowhere are we beyond the hand that holds that harrow. It’s the same hand that lifted Peter as he sank, raised a girl from her deathbed, and reached to accept a drink of water from a Samaritan woman from whom most would have turned away. The hand that harrows hell holds us safe.

Most parents know that, though there might be offenses that would divide them from a beloved child by distance or disagreement or distrust, nearly nothing could quite obliterate their love. And so we have the more reason to imagine that the Holy One who is love itself will stop at nothing—not even the gates of hell—to find us and make us whole and bring us home. This is very good news.

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