

Did the Early Church Preach the Gospel in Graveyards?

[1 Peter 4:6](#)

1 Peter, Day 20

For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

- 1 Peter 4:6, ESV

Francis of Assisi was a bit of an eccentric believer. He took Jesus' command to preach the Gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15) literally, and he would spend hours walking through the woods preaching Jesus to trees, birds, squirrels, flowers, etc. Today, his eccentricity has given us the legacy of the St. Francis garden statue, with Francis depicted preaching to birds or other critters, sometimes rendered as a bird bath.

Peter tells us that the Gospel "*was preached even to those who are dead.*" Should we envision the Apostle Peter going to the catacombs and tombs of the ancient world and preaching salvation in the name of Jesus to dead people? Some early church fathers, including Origen of Alexandria, apparently thought that Peter meant that the Gospel could be preached to souls in hell to give them another chance after death.

But Peter's not talking about preaching to dead people. Rather, he's referring to the fact that many people who had heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and had believed in Him for salvation had since died. Some people tried to stir up trouble in the early church because of this.

The Gospel proclamation of the early church under the Apostles was not "believe in Jesus so you can go to heaven when you die." It was much more Christ-centered than that. They proclaimed who Christ was, what He had come to do, and centered their proclamation on the reality of the resurrection and the coming return of Christ to judge the living and the dead. The hope of the believer, according to the Apostolic Gospel proclamation, is not primarily about going to heaven when we die but about Jesus making all things new and ending all evil and death when He returns.

Some detractors troubled early Christians by saying things like, "What about those who heard the Gospel and then died? They won't live to see your Jesus return, will they? What was the point of their faith? They died before the full coming of the kingdom in glory!" Peter is writing here to answer these critics and provide a true and living hope for all believers.

Believers who die in the Lord are blessed. Even though they did not live to see Jesus return to judge and make all things new, they do live spiritually with the Lord forever and will come with Him when He returns. They are "*judged in the flesh the way people are*" - that is, they die like all sinners and mortals. Yet they live to God in the presence of God in their spirits.

So, no, the early church didn't preach the Gospel to dead people. But because of the victory of Jesus over sin and death, those who die in the Lord preach the Gospel to us. Graves of believers proclaim their undying hope in their risen Lord, and the coming resurrection to glory of all who believe in Him!