

John 20:19-31

The Word of the Lord from John 20: “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, „Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:22-23). This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold the forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” With those words, the Lord Jesus entrusts to His disciples the Office of the Keys, and it sounds like powerful stuff. It is, but not in the sense that sinful natures crave. What comes easily to my mind is the Middle Ages, where the Pope would wield this like a weapon as he placed whole nations under interdict, saying, “Until your king submits to me, no one in his kingdom will be forgiven and all of you are going to hell.” That’s a horrible abuse and rightly condemned. The Office of the Keys is not about using the grace won by Christ to manipulate people: the Office of the Keys is about life after Easter.

We don’t talk about the Office of the Keys very much, except for all the times that we do. Let’s walk through this Gospel lesson for a few minutes, and then apply it to today.

I. The Absolution, The Sending and The Case Study

As our Gospel lesson begins, the disciples are in a locked room, fearing for their lives. It’s the evening of Easter, and they’re still trying to sort things out: Peter and John have seen the empty tomb and they’ve all heard the angels’ message of Jesus’ resurrection secondhand from the women, though they don’t believe it. Mary Magdalene says that she’s seen Jesus and even touched Him. But they’re still locked inside the room because of fear.

The fear comes from doubt. They don’t believe that Jesus is risen from the dead. They’re afraid that those who crucified Jesus are going

to target them next. They're afraid that the last three years of their lives as His disciples are going to doom them. They're afraid that, once they die, that's the end. They're afraid that any mercy God might have for them is gone, since they abandoned Jesus in His hour of greatest need. That doubt and fear cling to them, gnaw at them. As long as they doubt, they'll be afraid—and their lives will be dictated not by freedom and joy, but by terror that would have them keep running, keep hiding. If Jesus isn't alive, there's no deliverance. They're marked as "guilty" of being His followers, and that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. The despair of the last three days will continue. But so far, there's nothing they've encountered that can take that doubt and fear away.

Jesus can, so He appears to them in the midst of the locked room. He's brought His risen body and blood with Him: He stands there in the flesh. He doesn't just appear. He speaks: and He speaks to say, "Peace be with you."

This is not just a greeting. It's absolution. It's forgiveness. Jesus' first words to them aren't, "You've done such a lousy job of following Me that you're fired." Nor are they, "I'm giving you another chance to earn My favor." There's no condemnation. There's no requirement for them to make up for their failures. That's remarkable: for what if He is risen from the dead, but bent on revenge? What if He is alive, but only to punish all who had hurt or failed Him? Their fear and their doubt, their guilt and their shame, all cling to them. They can't get rid of their sins themselves. What if the Lord is back only to condemn the sinner? But He is not back for revenge or condemnation. He says "Peace be with you." In other words, "I'm at peace with you. My Father is at peace for you. I don't hold your doubt and fear against you: in fact, My hands, feet and side have holes in them to set you free from your doubt and fear." He could just as well say, "Be gone, fear. Be gone, doubt." He sends them away by His Word. That's why the disciples are happy to see the Lord. It's more than just a feeling of relief: the sins that were clinging to them, that would keep them from believing and rejoicing, are gone. Christ has spoken them away.

This gift is not just for them. It is for all who will believe, so He sends them. He says to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you." Sending them to do what? To speak and give His peace to others. How? "And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, „Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”"

In other words, He's sending His disciples to speak His peace to others. The world is full of people with sin clinging to them. Some are already sorry for it, but they just can't get rid of it—it clings to them like a bad tattoo no matter how hard they scrub it won't go away. The disciples will go to them and tell them about Jesus, about His death and resurrection. Then they'll go on to say, "Because Jesus died for you, God is at peace with you. Your sins are forgiven. They don't cling to you anymore."

There will be lots of others who are stuck in sin, but aren't sorry for it yet. This will require more work on the part of the disciples. First, they'll have to preach God's Law. They'll have to say, "The sin that you're committing is killing you. You're not at peace with God as long as you hold onto this sin. Repent! Confess the sin! Christ has died so that you might be forgiven, so that you might be at peace with God!" Some will be convicted by that preaching: they'll say, "That's true. This is wrong. I repent. I need the forgiveness that Jesus won for me." To those, the disciples will say, "You're forgiven in the name of Jesus! You're at peace with God!" Others won't be repentant: they'll say, "I'm going to hold onto this sin" for whatever reason. To those, the disciples will say, "As long as you cling to that sin, that sin clings to you. You're not forgiven, because you've chosen to worship the sin and reject the forgiveness Christ offers. Repent. Turn from your sin, so that you might be at peace with God!"

That's the exercise of the Office of the Keys. To those who are repentant and desire forgiveness and peace with God, the disciples declare that they are forgiven and at peace with God. But that does far more than just give information: it looses the sin. It sends the sin away. The Word of forgiveness gives forgiveness and peace.

The Gospel lesson goes on to give us the case study of Thomas, who missed Jesus' appearance in the locked room. He's also plagued with doubt: it's the sin that keeps him from believing, and it's clinging to him. When they see him, the other ten declare to him, "We have seen the Lord!" ("Doubt, be gone! Fear, be gone! You can be free of that sin and rejoice with us!") But Thomas doesn't believe them. Despite the Word that he's heard, he holds onto his doubt and says, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe."

Note how Thomas articulates his doubt: he says that he doesn't believe the Word. The Word of God isn't good enough for him. He has to see with his eyes. And in that he's no different than the other disciples who wouldn't believe the women but only believed after Jesus appeared to them. We should probably note something else, too: it's very likely that Thomas isn't being a jerk. Sometimes people hold onto sins out of love for them; but sometimes they also hold onto sins out of fear. They know the sin is wrong, but they're afraid of the pain and the risk of doing the right thing. Thomas could well be afraid of more heartbreak, of more grief. He could well be saying, "It hurt too much when Christ died. I cannot believe the news of His resurrection for fear that my heart would be broken again." The devil doesn't play fair, and he'll get people to hold onto their sin any way he can.

The other disciples do not ostracize Thomas.—they know that would be like the pot calling the kettle black—he's where they were prior to Jesus' appearance among them. So, he's with them eight days later, back inside a locked room. Jesus appears again, and He speaks His absolution again: "Peace be with you." (Be gone, fear. Be gone, doubt.) And to Thomas, He says, "Put your finger here, and see My hands; and put out your hand, and place it in My side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Before the risen, present Savior, Thomas repents of his doubt and fear, and exclaims, "My Lord and My God!" He's restored. He's set free from sin by Jesus and His Word.

Jesus confirms this with what He says next: "Have you believed

because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Did you hear that? The Savior is talking about you.

I mentioned before that we don't talk about the Office of the Keys much, except for all the times that we do. What I mean is this: we don't use the phrase “Office of the Keys” much around here. But just about everything we do around here is the exercise of the Office of the Keys, because the Office of the Keys is where you find life after Easter. You may have secrets and a wide array of talent, but I'm quite sure that none of you have the ability to teleport or time-travel back to the locked room on the evening of the Resurrection. None of you can go back and see the risen Savior and put your fingers in His wounds. You don't have the same privilege as Thomas and the other ten.

But Jesus declared, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” He gives you faith by His Word, and He gives you forgiveness by His Word. That's what the Office of the Keys is about: giving you now the same life He gave at Easter.

An analogy might be helpful here: sometimes, doctors will encounter patients who are sick but refuse treatment. The patients may do so for a number of reasons: perhaps they feel fine, and so they don't believe the test results. Perhaps they've been led to be skeptical of medicine, so they don't believe the doctor is telling the truth. Perhaps they're afraid—afraid of surgery, afraid of the therapies. Perhaps they're so afraid of the possibility of dying that they don't want to confront the truth that they are sick. For any of these reasons—and probably there are others as well-- a patient might refuse treatment. At that point, all the doctor can do is speak the truth and say, “If you refuse the treatment, you're still sick and the problem isn't going to go away. It will only get worse. Eventually, it will kill you. I urge you to reconsider and admit your need for treatment, because we can get rid of problem and make you healthy again.” That's all the doctor can do, in the hope that the patient will change his mind.

That's what the Church does, too. You have sin that clings to you. It's true of everybody. You sin daily and much; left unforgiven, it's stuck to you. It's bound to you. It weighs you down and seeks to drag you back into unbelief; and unbelief is death. It will drag you down to hell.

So we tell you of your sin. We tell you of that within you that is killing you, because we want you to be alive. We want you to be free of guilt and shame, confident that you are at peace with God. Sometimes, you'll be well aware of your sin already and ready for forgiveness. Other times, though, you'll be tempted to cling to the sin instead. The devil will conspire with your sinful flesh in all sorts of ways in order to keep that sin bound to you. When you hear of your sin, you'll be tempted to refuse the treatment of forgiveness. Perhaps it's because you feel fine: you don't see how the sin is doing anybody any harm, the whole world's doing it and it seems to make your life a little happier or easier. Perhaps it's because you've become skeptical of religion, so you don't believe that God's Word is telling you the truth. Perhaps it's because you're afraid. You're afraid that you can't live without the sin, because it's too deeply entrenched within you. Perhaps, like Thomas might have been, you're afraid that repentance will break your heart and cause too much pain. The devil doesn't play fair: he'll make you believe that you need your sin to stay alive.

If you want to keep your sin, that is your decision. It's not God's doing: it's all on you. But if you decide to keep your sin, we can't tell you that you are forgiven. You're not. You've chosen to keep that sin rather than be set free from it. So if you choose to keep your sin, we simply tell you the truth that your sin is still there. It's bound to you. It's not forgiven, though Christ has died to take it away and forgive you.

This, by the way, is why it is so bad when churches compromise God's Word and condone various sinful practices. In doing so, they tell unrepentant people that they are at peace with God, when they are not. In doing so, they encourage sinners to hold onto their sin and be condemned on the Last Day. There is absolutely nothing loving about that at all.

That's the Office of the Keys. If you say you are sinful and need Christ's forgiveness, we tell you that you are forgiven. If you say that you don't need forgiveness, we tell you that—according to God's Word—you do: and we urge you to repent and be forgiven. If you say that you'd rather hold onto your sin, we tell you that you're still sinful and face God's judgment; and we urge you to repent and be forgiven. This isn't about power or manipulation: it's about truth. It is simply saying what God's Word says; and by His Word, God does the work of convicting and forgiving.

That's what we pastors practice in our office by confession and absolution. It's also what you practice as you tell other people about sin and grace.

A couple of final thoughts, then.

One is that we do well as individuals and congregations to examine ourselves carefully. Christ died for all sins, that all may be set free by faith. Sometimes, though, churches give the impression that some sins are simply unforgiveable. I had an interesting conversation recently, where the other said that churches seem to have one of two opinions about homosexuality: they either say, "You're welcome here because it's not a sin," or "Stay out because it is a sin." Scripture makes clear that it's a sin—but not an unforgiveable one. It's one that goes deep into psyche and soul, but one that Christ has died for. God grant that we preach God's Law in love to all sinners, and gladly preach His Gospel to all who repent, no matter their sins.

The other thought is, once again, an invitation to private confession and absolution. Some sins cling better than others, even after you've heard a general absolution. It may be because the sin was so awful that it doesn't stop haunting you. It may be that you need the forgiveness of someone who isn't around anymore to forgive you, and so you act as one who remains unforgiven. Such sins have great power over you, and they will keep you locked up in a room out of fear. Whatever the reason: if you cannot seem to shake a sin that you

would love to be free of, private confession is a great gift of God. It is an opportunity to hear from God's Word that Christ has died for all of your sin—even that one. It's an opportunity to hear God say through the mouth of His called servant, "I forgive you for all of your sins—even that one."

Forgiveness is what the Office of the Keys is all about. It's what Jesus died on the cross to win, and what He gave to the disciples that evening in the locked room. He still gives it to you as well, by means of His holy Word. Be gone, sin. Be gone, fear: for you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen