

Rev. Luke C. Werre
Peace, Sun Prairie
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Easter 3

John 20:21-23

THE MINISTRY OF THE KEYS

If you had just come back from a harrowing experience -you were the survivor of a plane crash, a shipwreck - wouldn't you likely want to share the details of the whole episode with your family or friends while they listen with rapt attention? Wouldn't you want to take some time with them to process everything that happened?

On Easter evening, the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples gathered in the upper room. We don't see Jesus rehashing everything that took place beginning in the Garden of Gethsemane. He certainly proves to them He is truly alive. Shows them His hands and feet. But then He gets right to business. He is purposeful. He acts as if nothing else matters right then. Everything else can wait except this most important matter that He must address first.

Jesus said, *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”* And with that he breathed on them and said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

Of all the things they could have hashed over after they were reunited, this is the one matter that Jesus wanted to instill in them. Every year right after Easter Sunday we hear these words of Jesus from John 20. We usually end up focusing on Thomas, but this year let’s focus on these words of Jesus in the upper room. These words serve as the basis of what we call the Ministry of the Keys.

In your service bulletin, there is a blue insert entitled, “From Luther’s Small Catechism.” If you would, please pull this out. It has a subtitle, “The Use of the Keys.” Along with Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer, this is one of the main components of the Small Catechism that Lutheran children learn and memorize in their instruction.

In the first section entitled, “The Keys,” Luther first defines what the Keys are and then in a straightforward way cites the Scriptural basis for it. Please follow along while I read it: *First: What is the use of the keys? The use of the keys is that special power and right which Christ gave to his Church on earth: to forgive the sins of penitent sinners but refuse forgiveness to the impenitent as long as they do not repent. Where is this written? The holy evangelist John writes in chapter 20, “Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*

I’ll restate that: Jesus has given His believers, you and me, the authority to forgive the sins of people who are repentant, and not to forgive the sins of people who are not repentant. When we do that, when you tell someone, “Hey, friend, your sins are forgiven,” you are doing it on Christ’s behalf and with Christ’s authority. Christ backs it as though He Himself said it from heaven.

That’s the key that unlocks and locks the door to heaven: telling someone their sins are forgiven or not forgiven. That seems like a huge responsibility. Why

would Jesus hand that kind of authority over to us? And why was He so intent about it right after His resurrection?

This gift, this Ministry of the Keys, is the fruit, the product, the way that His death on the cross and His resurrection benefit us. The fact that Jesus died on the cross and rose again is not just a nice happening. By His sufferings and death, Jesus achieved forgiveness for the entire world. Telling people their sins are forgiven is how He transfers that reality to us and makes it ours. It's like if someone put \$10,000 in a bank account and every time you swipe your debit card to make a purchase you are drawing from that \$10,000 -except in the case of the forgiveness Christ has won for us, the account balance never runs out. You can afford to be generous in telling people their sins are forgiven.

One of the most beautiful things about this is that Jesus deliberately, intently provided a way to know exactly where you stand with God. Isn't that often the question on our minds? Where do I stand with God? How can I know for sure? Is He mad at me? Is He happy with me? Jesus didn't want you to guess. If I am unrepentant, if I'm not concerned that I'm sinning or I stubbornly continue sinning I need someone in love to tell me, "As

long as you are this way, you are not forgiven. That's where you stand with God." But if I am concerned about my status with God, if I am contrite for my sin, I need to hear that God forgives me. In a sermon on this Bible passage in 1531 Martin Luther said, *If you desire forgiveness of your sin, you must seek it from the word, out of the mouth of the apostles, or the pastor, or a fellow Christian. If it is not sought from the mouth of the apostles, the pastor, or another Christian, you will not obtain forgiveness of sins. A preacher of Christ's gospel can say, To me is given authority from Christ over sins, to forgive them or to retain them.*

The crazy thing of this is that Christ treats this as the first order of business when He comes back from the dead - this is how we can have heaven -the first and most important thing on Christ's mind. But isn't it often the least thing on our minds? All kinds of things can keep us awake at night. So often we cannot rest until we get some matter resolved. But are we equally so intent to be assured that our sins are forgiven? Do we ever think, "I cannot rest until the pastor or some other Christian tells me where I stand with God and assures me I'm forgiven!"

To walk around with a vague idea that somehow God forgives is not faith and is not walking with Christ and will not bring salvation. Christ went to the trouble of providing a way for us to have certainty about our salvation, and now He wants us to exercise, embrace and cling to that certainty -that is by clinging to the words coming from the pastor or another Christian's mouth saying, "Christ died for you. Your sins are forgiven."

Christ did this because He loves you. Christ set this up because He is determined for you to have salvation.

And just as you can have that certainty, you can also give such certainty. You can say the words to a troubled soul, "Hey, Christ died for you. You're forgiven." Moms and dads, you teach your children to say the words, "I'm sorry." When they say those words, do you follow it by replying, "You're forgiven?" Christ doesn't hold back. He is not miserly with His forgiveness or peace. He distributes what He earned by His death and resurrection through me and you and every believer to get maximum reach. That is why on Easter night He gave us the Ministry of the Keys.

