

“The office of the Keys” John 20:19-31 Quasimodogeniti 2020

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On the evening of the first Easter, Jesus appears to the disciples and says:

*Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. And when He has 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 retrain the sins of any, they are retained.*

(John 20.21-23)

The resurrected Jesus gives to the disciples – in fact, the whole Church on earth - the power to forgive and retain sins. We call this the Office of the Keys because earlier, Jesus said to St. Peter

*. . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

(St. Matthew 16.19)

What Jesus said to Peter, he now says to all of us. You hold the keys of the kingdom. You have the Holy Spirit, and by that Spirit, you are to forgive the sins of those who repent and retain the sins of those who do not.

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So, on behalf of all of you, I stand here Sunday after Sunday, and in the place of Christ, I do exactly what he has given us all the authority to do. I forgive your sins. This is not my forgiveness; it is God’s forgiveness. It is not by my power that you are forgiven, but the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not my voice nor my words or anything I do that forgives you. It is Christ who forgives by the Word of his mouth and by the salvation he accomplished by the shedding of his blood on the cross of Calvary.

*“He who hears you, hears Me!”* (Luke 10.16) Jesus says to his disciples. When any pastor says, “I forgive you all your sins”, we all hear Christ. When we hear the pastor, we hear the words of God.

Now risen from the dead, Christ gives us his forgiveness through the Church and through the pastors whom he calls to stand in his place and exercise the authority he gives us all.

Thus, the old saying is true: Outside the church, there is no salvation, because outside the Church there is no forgiveness. In our gospel for today, Thomas is in dire need of Jesus’ forgiveness. He was not there when Jesus appeared and revealed himself as risen from the dead. And because he did not see the risen Jesus, he refused to believe that Jesus was in fact risen from the dead. He wasn’t doubting Thomas.

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He was unbelieving Thomas. *“Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe”*, he says. (John 20.25)

A week later, Jesus appears to the disciples again and this time Thomas is there. And the first thing Jesus does is forgive Thomas. *“Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing.”* (John 20.27)

Jesus doesn't use the words. He doesn't say “I forgive you.” But it's exactly what he does, and in response, Thomas gives one of the most amazing confessions in the entire Bible: *“My Lord and my God.”* (John 20.28) By the power of his presence and the power of his word, Jesus forgives Thomas. He renews Thomas' faith and restores Thomas' belief.

That's what Jesus' forgiveness does for you, too. And just like Thomas, we stand in dire need of God's forgiveness. St. John says: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (I John 1.8) But he also says, *“If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* (I John 1.9)

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So we confess our sins in the presence of God and one another so that we can hear Christ’s forgiveness spoken to us, and when that forgiveness is spoken, we are forgiven - without a doubt - because Christ has said to us, his Church, *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”* (John 20.23)

When Jesus forgives you, He restores your faith. He renews your faith. He cleanses you of all your unbelief and doubt and sin of every kind. When Jesus forgives you, he brings you back into his Church and lavishes you with his blessings of grace and life and salvation.

And that’s what happens every time we confess our sins before worship and then hear the forgiveness from the pastor’s mouth. Even I receive that forgiveness because it is Christ’s forgiveness given to us all by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus died on the cross to forgive all our sins. And now, risen from the dead, he has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven to each and every one of us. He has given us the keys, that by his power and through his servants we might be brought back into his Church, renewed in our faith, and restored in our belief with St. Thomas and with all the apostles every time we hear, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.”

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By his grace and by his word of forgiveness, Christ says to every one of us here today “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20.29) We have not seen the Lord, but we will when he comes again in glory. We have not heard the voice of the Lord directly from his mouth, but we do hear his word every time the Scriptures are read and preached, and his forgiveness is spoken to us all. We have not heard his word of pardon from his lips, but we most certainly hear that word from his servants in the Church, and like St. Thomas, without a doubt, we have been forgiven by Christ our crucified and risen Lord.

So together with St. Thomas – today, and every day - we do here and now what we will do on the Last Day and in heaven for all eternity. We bow our hearts and our heads before the risen Christ and we say to him with our hearts and with our mouths, “My Lord and my God.”

Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia.

Amen.