

Lenten Mid-week II  
February 29, 2012  
John 20:19-23/The Office of the Keys

In Christ Jesus, Who has bestowed upon us the Keys to His Kingdom, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The Office and use of the Keys is probably the least understood of the six chief parts of the Small Catechism. Not only is the name of this chief part hard to know what it is talking about—The Office of the Keys?—but even when people know what it is talking about they sometimes still don't completely understand it.

In my years in the ministry I have heard people say “the pastor kicked someone out of church”; or “the congregation wanted to clean its membership rolls” or “the congregation has no right to tell me what to do” or “if I do this good thing God will forgive me.”

I remember in my ministry talking to some members from another Lutheran synod who thought it was terrible that we would take church discipline against a member of ours who was living together with someone outside of wedlock. Their church was recommending one of their members for a church office who was living with his girlfriend. They thought it was terrible for our congregation to be so judgmental and unloving toward our member to practice church discipline. I tried to show them from the Bible and from their own Lutheran Catechism that real love for the member caught in a public sin involves church discipline to lead him or her to repentance and the assurance of full and free forgiveness through Christ. A few agreed, but most still thought it was wrong of the congregation to “get so involved” in members' lives.

But that is what God wants us to do. He wants us to be lovingly involved with each other so much so that we can announce to one another “Your sins are forgiven you.” What greater message can we give to each other? Those words are far better than saying “Good morning,” or even “Have a nice day.”

The first text in the Scripture where we hear of the term “Keys of the Kingdom of heaven” is Matthew 16:19 where we read these words of Jesus to Peter, **"AND 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."**

The keys of the kingdom of heaven. Maybe there is some truth to the old tale of a gate at the entry-way into heaven and St. Peter is there with this key to let us in or to keep us out. Is this what this passage is teaching us?

No. First of all these keys are to be used **HERE ON EARTH!** We read again Jesus' words, **WHATEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH WILL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN, AND WHATEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH WILL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN."**

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are right here on earth. What are they? The Gospel, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. And what is the Gospel? The Gospel is the glorious good news of our Savior Jesus Christ. The Good News that the Son of God has come to this earth to take our place. He was born of the Virgin Mary, a true human being. He lived a perfect life in thought, word and deed for us. He then took all of our sins upon Himself and paid for their guilt and punishment by dying on the CROSS and experiencing damnation for us. He then also rose from the dead assuring us of a resurrection to everlasting life.

In one simple sentence the Gospel is the forgiveness of sins, everlasting life and salvation earned for us by Christ's merit—His perfect life, His substitutionary death on the CROSS and His resurrection from the dead. Again we see the Cross in direct application to this chief part of the Catechism. Without the Cross there is no “Office of the Keys.”

So what are these Keys to be used for? What are any keys used for? A key is used to unlock something—unlock your house door, or unlock your car. Without the key to a locked car or locked house one cannot enter except by force and the Lord says the kingdom of heaven cannot be taken by force, we can only enter through the spiritual door, which is Christ. Therefore one of the uses of the keys to the kingdom of heaven is to unlock the door to heaven. It is that power and authority that Christ Himself has given to us believers to

declare that heaven is open. We don't hand out metal keys; we proclaim full and free forgiveness of all sins to penitent sinners.

This is done whenever the Word of God is preached or when the Gospel is proclaimed in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This evening the keys were used when I announced, **"God our heavenly Father has forgiven all your sins. By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, He has removed your guilt forever. You are His own dear child. May God give you strength to live according to His will."**

But there is another use for a key—and that is to lock something. We lock our doors to prohibit someone from going into our house or car. This too, is a use of the Gospel, but not an active use. For when the Gospel is preached, the Holy Spirit works on man's heart to receive it and believe it. Those who are led to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus for their forgiveness receive that forgiveness and the assurance of everlasting life. But when others hear that Gospel message and reject it, their hearts are hardened to it. By their rejection of the free Gospel of forgiveness and life the door to heaven is being shut. They cannot enter in. To those who are not sorry for their sins and do not believe in Jesus Christ the door to heaven is locked and no forgiveness is announced. Proverbs tells us **HE WHO DESPISES THE WORD WILL BE DESTROYED.** Paul writes in Romans 2:5 **BUT IN ACCORDANCE WITH YOUR HARDNESS AND YOUR IMPENITENT HEART YOU ARE TREASURING UP FOR YOURSELF WRATH IN THE DAY OF WRATH AND REVELATION OF THE RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT OF GOD.** And Jesus says in John 3:18 **HE WHO DOES NOT BELIEVE IS CONDEMNED ALREADY, BECAUSE HE HAS NOT BELIEVED IN THE NAME OF THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD.**

So who has this power, only Peter? Well some believe that. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that only Peter had been given that power and then only those that he, Peter, has bestowed it upon which would be the bishops and the priests down through the ages. But our sermon text for this evening clearly shows that Jesus bestowed this authority and power upon all of the disciples. We read again John 20:19-23 **THEN, THE SAME DAY AT EVENING, BEING THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, WHEN THE DOORS WERE SHUT WHERE THE DISCIPLES WERE ASSEMBLED, FOR FEAR OF THE JEWS, JESUS CAME AND STOOD IN THE MIDST, AND SAID TO THEM, "PEACE BE WITH YOU." WHEN HE HAD SAID THIS, HE SHOWED THEM HIS HANDS AND HIS SIDE. THEN THE DISCIPLES WERE GLAD WHEN THEY SAW THE LORD. SO JESUS SAID TO THEM AGAIN, "PEACE TO YOU! AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, I ALSO SEND YOU." 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 RETAIN THE SINS OF ANY, THEY ARE RETAINED."**

Jesus here is speaking to the 10 disciples on Easter Sunday evening after His resurrection. Judas was dead and Thomas was not there. Forgiving and retaining, loosing and binding, locking and unlocking are the same commands. They were given the authority to go out and proclaim forgiveness and open the door to heaven or to proclaim to those who were impenitent that they had no forgiveness and the door was locked.

But is that all? Is it only Peter and the rest of the disciples who have the authority to forgive sins through Jesus? We turn to another reading from the Scriptures on this same subject. In Matthew 18:15-18 we read, **"MOREOVER IF YOUR BROTHER SINS AGAINST YOU, GO AND TELL HIM HIS FAULT BETWEEN YOU AND HIM ALONE. IF HE HEARS YOU, YOU HAVE GAINED YOUR BROTHER. "BUT IF HE WILL NOT HEAR, TAKE WITH YOU ONE OR TWO MORE, THAT 'BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY WORD MAY BE ESTABLISHED.' "AND IF HE REFUSES TO HEAR THEM, TELL IT TO THE CHURCH. BUT IF HE REFUSES EVEN TO HEAR THE CHURCH, LET HIM BE TO YOU LIKE A HEATHEN AND A TAX COLLECTOR. "ASSUREDLY, I SAY TO YOU, WHATEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH WILL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN, AND WHATEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH WILL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN.**

These words of our Savior were spoken to all believers. In our Christian congregation we are to be so concerned for each other that if we see one of our brothers or sisters living in a sin we are to go to them in private and **"tell him his fault"** and in this way try to lead him to repentance so we can announce forgiveness in Christ. This is done out of love for the sinner and to maintain decency and order in the

congregation. It is done to show to the one caught in the sin and to others who know of it that Christ does not condone or approve of this sinful lifestyle and neither does His Church. Living in an unrepentant sin can lead only to death and damnation. These steps of Church discipline need to be followed for the sinner's sake. And when the Holy Spirit works repentance and a confession of sins, there is indeed joy and rejoicing among the brothers and sisters in Christ as well as with the angels in heaven and forgiveness is gladly announced.

Jesus says to us again in our text this evening: **AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, I ALSO SEND YOU.** We have been given by Jesus the authority to forgive and retain sins. Jesus is saying to you and to me, "I am sending you to forgive sins in My name." When we announce the forgiveness of sins through Jesus we are figuratively unlocking the door of heaven. What a wonderful privilege, responsibility and power we have been given by Christ. To declare to someone that their sins have been remitted, done away with, canceled, removed alone through Jesus life, death and resurrection and that the door to heaven is now open. This action is as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ dealt with that person Himself.

Even as we have been given the authority from Jesus to declare sins forgiven; so also we have been given the authority and responsibility to declare a person's sins retained, or as Jesus said earlier, "his sins are still bound to him," thereby figuratively closing the door to heaven. This action is also as valid and certain in heaven as if Christ dealt with that person Himself.

This action is never done with joy or happiness, but it is done out of love, to lead the person to realize his/her sins and through the power of the Spirit to be led to repentance, forgiveness and life in and through Jesus.

A Christian's desire is ever that of our Savior, who said through Peter that **HE IS NOT WILLING THAT ANY SHOULD PERISH BUT THAT ALL SHOULD COME TO REPENTANCE.**

Do you realize that your risen Savior is always standing beside you in His Word? Do you feel His hand on your shoulder? Do you hear Him say to you, "**AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, I ALSO SEND YOU?**" You have been inducted into your office of the ministry of Christ, willing servants and slaves for Christ by the Holy Spirit who has brought you to faith in Jesus through the Gospel. You have been equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit and you are called to go out and to exercise this authority you have to forgive sins in Jesus' name.

Jesus also said in Luke 24:46-48 "**THUS IT IS WRITTEN, AND THUS IT WAS NECESSARY FOR THE CHRIST TO SUFFER AND TO RISE FROM THE DEAD THE THIRD DAY, "AND THAT REPENTANCE AND REMISSION OF SINS SHOULD BE PREACHED IN HIS NAME TO ALL NATIONS, BEGINNING AT JERUSALEM. "AND YOU ARE WITNESSES OF THESE THINGS.**

May God grant to all who are here this evening, the desire to faithfully perform this ministry of declaring forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name to all whom we meet. But we also have the responsibility to tell those who do not repent, those who do not believe in Jesus that their sins still are retained to them, the door to heaven is shut to them. But when repentance is worked in their hearts, when confession of sins is made, what joy it is to proclaim forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus.

Jesus has work for you and me to do. We do not only have this **PEACE and FORGIVENESS** to hold in our hearts, but we will be moved by Christ's forgiving love to hand it on to others who need it as much as we do. As the hymn writer puts it: **He who slumbered in the grave is exalted now to save; now through Christendom it rings that the Lamb is King of kings.**

**Now He bids us tell abroad how the lost may be restored, how the penitent forgiven, how they, too, may enter heaven. Hallelujah!**

Amen.