

April 27, 2025 – John 20:19-31

It was the evening of that day, the first day of the week. The tomb was empty. The stone was rolled away. Mary had seen the Lord. Peter and John had found the grave clothes lying there.

But still, the disciples locked themselves in a room. Because they were afraid. Afraid of the Jews. Afraid of what came next. And, perhaps, afraid that they had failed too deeply to be forgiven. After all, they had run when Jesus was arrested. Peter had denied Him. They had all fled.

And yet, Jesus came. He came through locked doors. He came to that room filled with guilt and fear. And He stood among them. And He said, *"Peace be with you."*

That is no mere greeting. That is not just a friendly hello. When the risen Christ says, *"Peace be with you,"* He is not wishing them peace. He is giving it.

His Word does what it says. *"Peace be with you"* means: your sins are forgiven. *"Peace be with you"* means: death has been defeated. *"Peace be with you"* means: you are not my enemies. You are my friends. You are my brothers. You are still my disciples.

Jesus shows them His hands and His side. This is no spirit, no illusion. This is the crucified and risen Christ. The wounds are real, but they are the hard earned battle scars of victory. And again, He says for a second time, *"Peace be with you."*

And then something unexpected happens: He breathes on them. He breathes on them and says, *"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."*

Here we are given one of the most important, most comforting, and most often misunderstood gifts of the risen Christ: the Office of the Keys. The authority to forgive sins in His name. The authority to speak peace. Not as a wish, but as a gift from the crucified and risen Lord.

Martin Luther felt this gift was worth an entire section in the Small Catechism. So I think it's worth taking a moment to review this great gift, both in the words of scripture and in the words of the catechism. For it is the entire foundation of Confession and Absolution in the Church.

And this ties in to something Jesus said just before this. He says, *"As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."* What the Father sent Jesus to do, Jesus now sends His apostles to do. They are sent with the same mission: to forgive sins. To reconcile sinners to God. To bring peace to those without peace because of their guilt and fear.

And so He breathes on them. Just as God breathed life into Adam in the garden, Jesus breathes His Spirit into His Church. And with that Spirit, He gives what he once referred to earlier in his ministry as *"the keys of the kingdom of heaven."* The authority to bind and to loose, to forgive and to retain.

This isn't a man-made office. It's not symbolic. It's not mere psychology. This is a divine command. Luther puts it this way in the Small Catechism:

"What is the Office of the Keys? The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent."

He then quotes this very passage before us today from John's Gospel and continues: "What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command... it is as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

That means that when a pastor, like myself, stands before you and says, "I forgive you all your sins," it is not just a hopeful phrase. It is not symbolic. It is not me just trying to make you feel better. It is the voice of Jesus. It is the breath of the crucified and risen Lord. It is Christ's peace made real for you.

That, of course, leads to an inevitable concern, though. “All I need to do is show up at church and I'm going to heaven?” That doesn't sound right.

And that's because it's not right. You're forgiven not because you showed up here, but through repentance. Now, that too has it's own elements that are misunderstood.

Because God doesn't need to hear a list of all the sins you've committed. He already knows. Nor can we earn forgiveness by being sorrowful enough – a miserable enough sinner. That too is beside the point.

We repent of our sins because we know we need to be forgiven. We're poor miserable sinners not because we act poor and miserable, but because our sins have made us feel poor and miserable. Because we've recognized just how sinful we are and we're ready to stop pretending. We're ready to be honest with ourselves and with our God about just how sinful we truly are. Just how much we need his forgiveness.

And we do this publicly, together, because our sin separates us not just from God, but from one another. No one gathered here today has any room to be arrogant or self-righteous with anyone else here. Because each one of us has heard the other say, “I am sinful and unclean. I have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed.”

But, of course, we are also invited and encouraged to confess privately. Privately in our hearts. But also privately to me, your pastor. Not out of fear, but out of freedom. Not because we're forced to, but because we are blessed. Private confession is not a burden. It is a treasure. An opportunity for me to give a personal word of peace for your troubled soul.

And when you confess your sins to me, I do not sit in judgment. I do not represent myself. I stand in the stead of Christ. And the words I speak are not my own. The forgiveness I speak is valid and certain, even in heaven, because it's not my word. It is Christ's word to you.

*“Have you believed because you have seen me?”* Jesus asks Thomas. *“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

That is you. You have not seen Jesus' hands and side. You have not heard His voice with your ears. But through the absolution of your sins, you do hear Him. Through the pastor's word of grace, you do receive Him. Through the Church's ministry, you are forgiven.

Blessed are you, not because you see, but because you believe. Not because you feel forgiven, but because you are forgiven. Because Jesus has said so.

And John tells us why these things are written: *“so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.”*

His name. That name spoken over you in Baptism. That name declared over you in absolution. That name given into your mouth at the Lord's Supper. Where that name is, there is forgiveness. Where Christ is, there is peace.

So do not be afraid to confess your sins. You are not coming to a judge. You are not facing condemnation. You are coming to the risen Lord. The One who comes through locked doors. The One who breathes the Spirit. The One who speaks peace.

He has given this gift to His Church. He has given it to me, your pastor. Not for power, but for comfort. Not for control, but for joy. Absolution is not a ritual. It is not just for show. It is the living, breathing Word of Jesus Christ. And it is for you.

So when your sins trouble you—come. When your guilt burdens you—come. When you're not sure if you are really forgiven—come. Confess. Be absolved. And hear Christ say once more: *“Peace be with you.”* Amen.