

2nd Sunday of Easter-A
May 1, 2011
“Blessed are Those Who Believe”
John 20:19-31

Grace to you and peace, from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

For millions of people throughout the world, including many you know, whether they celebrated it or not, Easter has come and gone. The Easter baskets are empty—the candy eaten. The bunnies are put away, and so for many, what happened on that first day of the week, on that First Easter Day, has been celebrated and commemorated, but hold on a moment, was Jesus’ being raised bodily from the dead the only wonder that happened that day?

Of course Jesus’ resurrection is absolutely unique in all of the world’s history, as is everything about Jesus, and as is everything connected to God’s promise of a Savior and the promises’ fulfillment, and we must never adopt or entertain a ho hum or cavalier attitude about Jesus’ death and His resurrection, for they really are once in an eternity type events. And more than them being just one-of-a-kind happenings, they were absolutely necessary in keeping us from suffering under God’s wrath forever. And coupled with that they were done for us out of God’s kindness and not because we deserved, earned, or warranted such blessings at all. And so Jesus’ being raised from the dead on the first day of the week is worth all the praise, adoration and thankful joy we can muster, but was that the only miraculous wonder that happened that day?

Well, no, not according to the apostles and disciples, and not according to our Gospel reading this morning. Of course there were many wonders that happened over the days until Jesus' ascension, and we'll get to them as this Easter season progresses, but on the evening of the day that Jesus was raised from the grave, another miracle and gracious wonder took place.

The Apostle John tells us that because of their fear of Israel's leadership, especially those who had plotted and carried out Jesus' arrest and trial, and orchestrated His crucifixion; most of the apostles were holed up in a locked room. And while they were there, behind the locked doors, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "*Peace be with you.*" He then showed them His hands and His side, and John tells us they were all glad to see Him. Then the Lord said to them again, שְׁלוֹם אֲלֵיכֶם ("Shalom aleichem"), "*Peace be with you, As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.*" And when He'd finished saying that He breathed on them and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.*" So with that a real miracle happened, for the very power of God, to open and close the gates of heaven, was given to the church.

On that first day of the week, the evening of the day Jesus rose from the grave, He fulfilled a promise that he'd given His disciples a little while before He'd revealed His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration. And His promise to them was,

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). And so it was on that first Easter, the very same day that Jesus rose from the grave, that He came to His disciples and bestowed upon them the keys He'd promised, that is, the keys to open or to close heaven.

And the Keys to heaven, as Dr. Luther would explain it, are an office--a power--given by the Father through Jesus, to the Church for the binding and loosening of sins. And those are the same keys that Jesus used when He forgave the sins of the paralytic man that was lowered down in front of Him through a hole the man's friends made in the roof of the house Jesus was in.

And back then, just as now, misinformed or uninformed people, and people with limited faith questioned man's use of that power, man's use of those keys. When the paralytic man was lowed in front of Jesus and He saw his faith and that of the man's companions Jesus said to the man, *"Son your sins are forgiven."* And yet, at His words the Pharisees, the teachers of Israel, the teachers of the scriptures, were outraged. But why? Because they were thinking, *"Why in the world is this guy talking like that! He's blaspheming!"* *"Who can forgive sins except God alone?"* And isn't that what even we may have thought or said at some time about the pastor who stands before those in need of God's healing and says, *"I forgive you all your sins, in name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.?"*

I can assure you that many today that go by the name of Christian feel indignant and outraged like the Pharisees did in Jesus' day when a pastor gives absolution, because they conjecture, "*After all, who can forgive sins except God alone?*" And there are also many pastors of various denominations that wouldn't get caught standing in front of their congregations, saying "*I forgive you all your sins.*" And they wouldn't do it for the same faithless reason. After all, "*Who can forgive sins except God alone?*"

However, a miracle happened that evening of Jesus' resurrection, for it was then, that same day that power was conveyed when Jesus breathed upon the disciples and said, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.*" In other words, in was then and there that Jesus gave the keys to heaven, the power to open or close the gates of heaven, to the church, and it's by virtue of the church's Call to a pastor that he uses that power, that he uses those keys. And way back, the day when Jesus forgave the sins of that paralytic man and he got up and walked out of the house in front of the whole crowd completely healed, scriptures tells us, "*In awe the crowd praised God who had given such authority to men*" (Matthew 9:8).

Not only did Jesus rise from death on the day we now call Easter, but by virtue of His resurrection we're assured that His suffering and death was sufficient to pay for the sin of the whole world, including yours and mine, and additionally, Jesus

that same day provided the means so His atonement can be bestowed on all who are repentant and believe the church's word of forgiveness, or be withheld from those that are unrepentant and refuse to believe.

To be sure, God has given no other way to forgive sins other than through the spoken or read Word of God. Even Martin Luther warned saying, *“If you don't look for forgiveness through the Word, you'll end up looking for forgiveness inside yourself, as a sense of some inner forgiveness. But don't do that. Don't seek assurance of sins forgiven in your feelings, emotions, or other signs, but rather anchor your hope alone on the unchanging promise Jesus gives through the Keys He bestowed upon the church. Feelings change, but with God there is “no variation or shifting shadow due to change” (James 1:17).*

And the bestowal of the keys to heaven occurred by the breath, or the Spirit of Jesus' living Word, as it was breather out on all His apostles. And this is important, because Jesus' life-giving keys are all about God breathing. God breathed life into the first man, Adam. God breathed life into dry bones, through His servant Ezekiel (Ezekiel 37); and all scripture is God breathed, as Paul teaches in 2 Timothy 3:16. And so it is that through faithful Word based preaching, teaching, absolving, baptizing, and communing that God still breathes life into His Church today.

The blessings of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the blessings of that First Easter, are still being bestowed upon people, upon you, because through your pastor Jesus continues speaking forgiveness into your ears and your hearts, for He said to His disciples, "*The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me*" (Luke 10:16).

When you hear God's word, His words are more than mere spoken or written sentences of nouns and verbs that carry and convey information, because God's words are efficacious, that is, they actually perform what they say, as He says, "*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*" (John 6:63b, ESV). God's words are like medicine—like spiritual penicillin; and just as penicillin works inside you, so His living words enter you and go to work in you. And it's His words breathed into you that actually create your faith.

Did you know that to most people of the world, including some Christian denominations, pastors are considered little more than religious leaders, similar to Islamic imams or Buddhist priests? For others they are nothing more than a Chief Executive Officer, but all those notions are wrong, and come from unbelief! For you see, Christian pastors through their Christ-centered congregations are divinely called to **the office of speaking in the stead of Jesus**. They are His servants. And as they prepare to preach and teach God's message they inhale the God-breathed, life giving Word; those God breathed words—words that cleanse, forgive, heal,

and save, which are then breathed out on all those who receive in faith, the living word of the Lord.

Jesus' resurrection is an unparalleled miracle, and we will rejoice and celebrate it forever, but other miracles happened too, including the Easter bestowal of the power of the Keys upon the church of which we are all recipients, and that's why the Apostle John at the end of our Gospel reading for today says, "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these 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*" (John 20:30-31).

And so we do have life in His name, for He is Risen, He is Risen in deed, and He has bestowed on us His Word of forgiveness, His powerful Word to forgive in Jesus' name, Amen.