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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Second Sunday of Easter (Series A)

April 23, 2017

Text: John 20:19–31

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

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“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” (Small Catechism, LSB 326). So we confess in the Small Catechism. The resurrected Jesus – please note that fact – the resurrected Jesus has given His redeemed, loved, and sanctified Church the authority to pronounce forgiveness to anyone and everyone who repents of their sins. Similarly, the Church has the authority from the resurrected Jesus to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant, that is, no forgiveness is promised to those who refuse to hear God's Word, turn from their sins, and seek God's favor in Christ Jesus.

The Office of the Keys was given to the apostles and the Church upon which she is founded so that the victory of the Lord's death and resurrection can be shared in its fullness to the world!! It is a grievous error that some Christians make when they assert that the Church and the pastoral ministry established within Christ's Church does not have the authority to pronounce forgiveness of sins or, as the need should arise, to announce that there is no forgiveness for the unrepentant as long as they do not turn from their sins. The Office of the Keys is an awesome privilege and responsibility given to the Church in general, and to her pastors in particular.

Some of you may recall my recollections of my very first Divine Service in the Lutheran Church. The congregation we visited – which later catechized Vickie and me – followed the communion service in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 15. All was going well until I heard the pastor speak the same words I spoke earlier in this service, “Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” I was scandalized! Who is that man, a sinner to be sure, to forgive my sins?! How dare he do that which only God can do!

The pastor was exercising the Office of the Keys in pronouncing Christ's forgiveness to a congregation filled with sinners. This authority was bestowed upon the Church by the resurrected Jesus. The specific Biblical text that bestows this authority is found in today's gospel reading, John 20:19–23. The context? It's the very first Easter evening. The disciples have heard reports of Jesus' resurrection but they are still afraid, unsure of what's going on. So they are locked behind closed doors, hoping to go unnoticed by the Jewish authorities.

¹⁹On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." ²²And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld."

The Office of the Keys is the authority to preach the fullness of Christ's death and resurrection in the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of sinful men, women, and children. To resist or fight against the Church's authority to forgive sins is to "fight against Christ, against His Word, against His merit, and against His true Church" (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v. 1, p. 236). The authorized pronouncement of particular sins of a particular sinner being forgiven by a specific, ordained servant of God's Word is the very essence and heart of the Bible Gospel! Freedom, peace, a clean conscience, joy, new life in the Spirit – all the blessings of Christ's complete redemption won for us in His life, death, and resurrection – are freely and truly given.

"For what does this mean: Christ has completely redeemed us? It means that Christ has done and suffered everything for us that we should have had to suffer and do in order to be saved. We do not have to blot out our sins; Christ has already blotted them out. We do not have to reconcile God; Christ has already reconciled Him. We do not have to merit God's grace; Christ has already earned it for us. We do not have to fulfill the Law for our salvation; Christ has already fulfilled it. We do not have to procure a righteousness that is admissible before God; Christ has already procured it. We do not have to conquer death, the devil, and hell; Christ has already conquered them for us. We do not have to earn our own worthiness in order to enter heaven; Christ has already earned it for us. In short, we do not have to complete the work of our salvation; Christ has already completed everything, drained the cup of our

deserved suffering to the very last drop, paid our debt to the very last penny, and done the will of God the very last letter.

“This...must be preached to all men. Preaching the Gospel is merely saying to all men: Sinners, rejoice! Christ has already blotted out your sins. Christ has already reconciled you with God. Christ has already earned God’s grace for you. Christ has already fulfilled the Law. Christ has already procured a righteousness for you which avails before God. Christ has already conquered death, hell, and the devil. Christ has already earned the necessary worthiness for your entrance into heaven. In short, Christ has already completed the work of your salvation!” (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v. 1, p. 240).

Every sermon and worship service, every pastoral visit in the home, every Bible study, every hospital visit, or whatever the location may happen to be, yea, all pastoral care is an exercise of this authority, the Office of the Keys.

Yes, the Lutheran Church retains the practice of public confession and absolution, as we hear at the beginning of our worship services. The Lutheran Church also retains and cherishes the gift of private confession and absolution.

Regarding private confession and absolution, the Small Catechism teaches us:

“Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven” (LSB 326). Dear saints of God, Christ gave His Church this wonderful gift of confession and absolution so that you can receive the all the fruits of His resurrection victory. I heartily encourage you to make use of private confession and absolution. To confess your sins and to receive God’s forgiveness of those sins is simply to receive what Christ desires to give. In truth, it means to confess with your mouth that Jesus is both Lord and God; the God and Lord who saves and forgives you all your sins.

A brief word about the particulars of private confession and absolution. We do not have specific times established for private confession and absolution though that could be done if there is interest from the congregation. Otherwise, at any time, you may request confession and absolution. I, as your pastor, have sworn before God and His Church that I will never divulge the sins confessed to me. There are no exceptions to this oath. Never means never, to no one at any time henceforth and into eternity.

The reason for absolute confidentiality is the sins confessed and absolved have been taken away forever by the Lord Jesus. The psalmist declares (103:11–12), “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” How can I or any pastor bring back what Christ has so completely removed from us?

And the joy and peace received from Christ’s forgiveness are blessings that human language cannot adequately describe. Dear saints, receive this great gift authorized and bestowed by the Lord who is the perfection of divine wisdom and love.

Let me close this sermon on the Office of the Keys with a quotation from C.F.W. Walther, our first Synod president. He preached these words to his congregations; they were published in 1870:

“Our Church teaches in all its purity and fullness that Christ has completely redeemed all men, that a person is righteous before God and will be saved alone by grace through faith; for that reason our Church has also held fast to the precious doctrine of absolution. As long as the doctrine of justification alone through faith shines brightly in our Church, so long it will not let the comfort of the absolution be taken away. However, if one does not have the article of justification alone by grace through faith in its purity, infernal darkness must enter, one must deny the power of absolution, and with it the perfection of Christ’s redemption” (C.F.W. Walther, *Gospel Sermons* v. 1, p. 241).

Dear Lord Jesus, preserve within us the love of your pure Gospel whereby we receive the free forgiveness of sins unto eternal life. Keep in our midst the Office of the Keys so that Your kingdom may flourish and Your name be hallowed. Amen.

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

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.