

**“Easter, Continued”** - The Second Sunday of Easter - John 20:19-31

April 12, 2026

The Word of the Lord from John 20:21-22: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ,

**I. Easter Morning and Easter Evening**

Easter morning is far, far better news because of Easter evening.

All that day, the disciples are doubtlessly conflicted. The image of Jesus’ suffering and death is freshly seared on their minds from Friday, and the despair has been palpable ever since. But as of Sunday morning, the body is gone, the tomb is empty; and the women keep insisting that they’ve heard from angels that Jesus is risen from the dead—and that some of them have even seen Him alive. They’ve heard Him speak, and they’ve relayed His living Word to the disciples. But the disciples don’t believe that

He’s risen. They don’t know what to believe. So, in the evening, ten of them are hiding in a room, the doors locked out of fear.

So as of Easter evening, they’re full of questions. Could it be possible that Jesus is risen? And if He is risen from the dead, what is He risen for? He’s taken a lot of abuse, so maybe it’s time for vengeance: maybe He’ll strike back at His enemies...maybe He’ll strike out at His disciples who failed Him so miserably.

See what I mean? You and I know that the Resurrection is good news, but the disciples don’t. Easter morning has raised a bunch of questions, but they’re still hiding in a locked room.

Then, Jesus stands in the midst of them. He’s suddenly there. He didn’t knock or pick the lock or slip through a window. He’s just there among them, and He speaks to them. Note His first words to His’ disciples and treasure them as your own. He says to them, “Peace be with you.” He doesn’t say, “You’re fired.” He doesn’t say, “It’s payback time.” He doesn’t even say, “Although you’ve utterly failed to be faithful, you’ve still got a shot at heaven if you just clean up your act and do well enough from here.”

He says, “Peace be with you.” The first thing He tells them is that He is at peace with them. He is not back with vengeance to punish sinners—that’s the last thing the risen Christ comes to do. He’s just died for the sins of the world, including the sins of the disciples. His first words announce to them that the price has been paid for their redemption. God does not hold their sins against them because Christ has died for every last one of them.

And now Christ is risen from the dead. He shows them His hands and His side, where nails and spear have pierced Him. It’s really Him, not an imposter. It’s really His body, not a ghost: He hasn’t been raised

up “in spirit” only, whatever that means. He’s fully alive, His body revived and blood coursing through His veins. This is important, too, because it declares that He has defeated the entire curse of sin.

Sin brought death to soul and body, so Jesus restores life to both soul and body. Calvary isn’t a draw, where the grave gets to hold on to flesh and bone. The grave is utterly defeated. Death gets no consolation prize. It’s an enemy under the feet of Jesus, and can do nothing without His permission.

This is what the disciples hear and see on Easter evening, and it’s a vital part of the Easter story.

After all, imagine what would happen if Jesus had risen from the dead and simply ascended into heaven. The victory over sin would have been won, but the disciples never would have found out. They would have stayed in a locked room for a while considering the possibilities, and then likely would either have dispersed or died trying. End of story, no hope. But Jesus didn’t die merely to defeat sin and death and devil, but then tell no one and leave His people as uninformed victims. So, He appears to His disciples. He shows them He’s risen, body and all. He tells them what it means—they’re at peace with God, and God will raise them up from the dead, body and all, to everlasting life.

That takes care of the disciples, but it doesn’t help anybody else. Let’s say, for instance, that you live in the 21st century in Edmonton, Alberta: how are you going to know that you’re at peace with God, that your sins are forgiven and that you have everlasting life?

Jesus takes care of that, too; and it begins Easter evening. We read: “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending 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 withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”

God has always worked by His Word. It’s how He created everything in the first place. It’s how Jesus usually healed people throughout His public ministry. On Easter evening, He declares that this is how He will continue to save—by speaking life-giving words of forgiveness. Except that He’s not going to thunder it from heaven or go it alone. He’s giving that news to His people to speak: it’ll be their mouths moving, but it will be His Word saving. Wherever they go, they’ll run into people who are trapped and haunted by sin. They’ll tell them that Jesus has died for their sins and Jesus is risen from the dead to give them grace and life. The Holy Spirit will work through that Word of Jesus to give faith. When people believe the Word by that God-given faith, the disciples will say, “You’re forgiven! You’re at peace with God! God no longer holds your sins against you! Heaven is yours.” That’s what Jesus means when He says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.”

Now, not everyone will welcome the news. They’ll reject the message and the faith that the Holy Spirit gives, perhaps because they prefer to live in their sin or because they follow a false god. Some will say, “I don’t believe in this Jesus. I don’t believe I’m set free from sin.” In that case, the disciples will say, “If you don’t want this forgiveness, Jesus does not force it upon you. He does not force you to give up your sin. You’ve still got it—in fact, it’s bound to you. You still face eternal judgment, and you should fear the wrath of God. But it’s still true that Christ has died and Christ is risen, and we urge you to repent!”

That's what Jesus means when He says, "If you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." This is what is called the Office of the Keys: when sins are forgiven, the gates of heaven are unlocked, thrown wide open. When sins are retained and forgiveness withheld, the gates of heaven are locked tight.

We have a test case in our Gospel lesson: Thomas is missing on Easter evening when Jesus comes and institutes the Office of the Keys. When he returns, the disciples can't wait to tell him, "We have seen the Lord!" What better news could there be? But...Thomas doesn't believe it. He's made a false god out of his fear, and he believes the lies that fear tells more than the Word of Jesus that his brothers tell him. So he objects, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe." He hears the news that Christ is risen, and he rejects it. We don't know what the other disciples say next; but it would be fitting for them to say, "Whether or not you believe it, Thomas, it is still true. Christ is risen and has peace and forgiveness for you; but if you do not believe it, then you do not believe that you are forgiven—and that means your sins are still bound to you. You face God's judgment because you do not believe His Word." That's not an easy thing to say. But it's the loving thing to say.

Eight days later, Jesus appears again to the disciples in a locked room, and this time Thomas is there. Jesus speaks peace to them again—this includes Thomas, for Christ continues to offer forgiveness to all that they might repent and believe. In fact, Jesus shows Thomas His hands and side, invites him to put his fingers in the wounds. He's saying, "Thomas, I'm risen body and all for you, that you might be forgiven." Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and My God!" It's not a bad confession: he acknowledges that Jesus is both man and God and risen from the dead. And then there's more good news for you: Jesus says, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Many will believe in Jesus without seeing, because Jesus saves by His Word, not by sight.

That's how Easter is continued today.

## **II. Easter, Continued**

In his book *Law and Gospel*, C.F.W. Walther, first president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, tells a parable about the Office of the Keys. He speaks of a king who ruled over a nation of rebellious citizens; and one day, the king's son convinced him to declare a full and free pardon for every last rebel. The king did so: he sent his heralds out as his ambassadors, and they stood in town squares and on street corners and declared to all that the king did not hold their rebellion against them anymore. Many heard the heralds and believed, and so they enjoyed their lives as those pardoned and no longer threatened with punishment. They went and told others about the king's declaration, and so those others believed it, too. Whether or not people heard the king's word from the official herald in the town square or a neighbor over the fence, it didn't matter: what mattered was that it was the king's declaration, the king's pardon.

I suppose we could push the parable a little farther than Walther and say that some people who heard the declaration didn't believe it, so they either fled from the king's country or else they lived their lives in fear of the king. They continued their rebellion because they thought they were too far gone or refused to believe that the king could be merciful. This was not the king's doing or his desire: his pardon was for them, but they did not live as pardoned people because they didn't believe it.

The parable's parallels are pretty obvious: for the sake of His Son, God declares pardon and peace to all, because Christ has died for the sins of all. Christ sent out His disciples as His heralds, His apostles, to declare this pardon to all nations. This did not stop with the apostles: today, pastors are called to continue that apostolic ministry, to declare—on behalf of the Church—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. This is what pastors are to be about, whether it is preaching, teaching, administering the Sacraments, public or private confession or a hospital visit. They are called and sent to forgive sins; and, when necessary, withhold forgiveness when people don't repent.

But this isn't confined to pastors because the pardon isn't confined to them: this Office of the Keys is given to the Church. Whenever you tell someone of Christ's death and resurrection, or whenever you tell them that they are forgiven for Jesus' sake, you are declaring the pardon that Christ died and rose to give.

It doesn't matter if the speaker is a 95-year-old man or a three-year-old girl: what matters is the message, because the message is the message of the King.

It's by that Word of the Lord that we declare Christ's victory over sin and death. It's by His Word that we show people Jesus' hands and side and say "He died for you. This is for you!" It's with this Gospel that we say, "Peace be with you." It is by that Good News that Easter continues—all the time, not just once a year—until the Lord returns in glory.

Not everyone will believe the pardon, though. Many will reject the news. They'll prefer a life of ongoing rebellion, remain angry at God, doubt His mercy and elect to flee His kingdom forever. This does not mean that the news is untrue or the Word ineffective. To such we say, "Christ has still died and Christ is still risen. As long as you hold onto your sin, you're stuck with it and Judgment Day is coming. Because you hold onto your sins, God holds them to you. But it need not be that way—the Lord remains ready to forgive you. Repent!"

Be advised that the devil hates this proclamation as much as he hated the Resurrection, because the Word continues Easter through the ages. Satan will work you over hard, to convince you that you're not a good enough speaker to tell the news—as if you somehow have such power to weaken the Word of God! He'll convince you to be ashamed of the news that gives life so that you do not want to tell it to others, for that Word offers them life, too. He'll tell you that the Word certainly can't do any good, that you should leave this news and look for God in glorious things of this world, for the devil wants you to forget the Lord's Word that "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe"—believe by His Word! When you give in to the devil's temptations and fail to rejoice in the Gospel, fail to speak it to others as the opportunity comes, repent. Repent, and rejoice: for these sins are not bound to you, because Christ has died to take them all away, too.

In our present day, we look at Easter and think of it as a once-a-year celebration, as a big Sunday. For the early Christians, it was different: every Sunday was a little Easter. This remains true today. Whenever the people of God are gathered together around His Word and Sacraments, Jesus is in the midst of them. He is present to give them the victory He has won by His death and resurrection. He is present to say, "Peace be with you." He is present to give you His Word, that you might have the privilege of taking it to others. And He is present to say, "I forgive you all of your sins." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.