**John 20:19-31 (ESV)**

[19] On 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." [20] When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. [21] Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." [22] And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. [23] If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." [24] Now Thomas, one of the Twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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." [26] Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." [27] Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." [28] Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" [29] Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." [30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] 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.

**“Peace For Prisoners”**

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. Easter is more than celebrating a historical event. It has a movement that wants to go forward. This driving force flows from Jesus’ victory over the cross. He sends women away from His tomb. He walks with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He appears to His own behind locked doors. All of these interactions took place on the very first day of Easter. God was making waves and the baptized received the benefit. As the apostle Peter later wrote, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead…” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Of course, those receiving the benefit were also the ones to bear the cross. The earliest accusations Christ’s resurrection was against the baptized. Supposedly, they stole the body and secretly hid it away. Apart from St. Matthew noting how the Jewish leaders paid off the guards to make this false allegation (Matthew 28:11ff). We also witness that those so enthusiastic on Easter morning were by the end of the day found hiding no body of Jesus, but themselves. These were not crafty or confident disciples but ones deathly afraid of Jewish authority. They knew what Jesus had said, “… ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). The Church only has life from the power of Jesus whose absolution sets us free to have peace in Him.

The Jewish leaders did not need to do much, since the disciples already made a nice prison for themselves. Sinful fear had taken over their faith in Jesus. The women, Peter and John who looked in the tomb, even the Emmaus disciples were in a sorry state of affairs. Locked behind doors their panicked lives tried to solve the problem. Fortunately, Jesus cares for His little flock for He is the faithful shepherd. As easily as rising from the dead, the Savior once more appeared to His disciples. Instead of unlocking the doors. The Son of God met them face to face in their despair. No one else was going to get in, but more importantly, no one else could get out. In His risen glory Jesus gave the answer to their fears, “Peace be with you.” Words of absolution. Words of compassion. Words of life. Accompanying Jesus’ Word was a victory in the flesh as He showed them His hands and His side. The result was the same for everyone for “they were glad.” Jesus returned them to faith in Him.

As much as we see how the world threatens the Church. The baptized end up building prisons out of our own fear. Sinners panic and we strive for a peace apart from the Savior. In other words, it is to stand on works and not faith in Jesus. If we do not see this kind of prison made by our hands. Look at the Ten Commandments. There we find the reason for confessing our captivity, “by what we have done and by what we have left undone.” Peace from panic is the purpose of the church. It is to give the same answer as on that first day of Easter. The forgiveness of sins. “Peace be with you” is Christ’s undying life for His Church. This power of absolution does not reside in any of us. It belongs to Jesus and it comes from His Word. As C.F.W. Walther declares, “If we would only truly believe in absolution, with what joy would we attend church whenever it is pronounced!” (L & G 173). When we come to the Divine Service, it is God’s Service of Word and Sacrament. He sets us free giving peace from sinful panic. His forgiveness turns fear into faith. Jesus appears for one purpose to say, “Peace be with you!”

Those forgiven were free with peace to proclaim. Jesus sent His baptized with the same forgiving power into the world. He said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” The office of the keys comes from Christ. As God’s Son physically suffered and died for the sins of the world, now His Church visibly brings this salvation to the sinful world. As Harold Buls has noted, “Christians are sent with the message which is as valid as if Christ were dealing with human beings Himself”[[1]](#footnote-1). For some it is life but for others it is death. The reading from Acts showed the Jews reaction to the words preached by St. Peter and the apostles for “When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.” It has always been that way in Christ’s Church. There is no business model for success only the blessing to speak forgiveness in the Name of Jesus.

The peace to proclaim comes from the peace not to panic. Those forgiven now forgive with the same forgiveness. We are the body of Christ in this world. Absolution flows out into the lives of all the baptized. It enters the private lives of the people, but also finds its place in the public office of pastor. The keys to forgive and retain sins are active among the whole church by the called servants of the Word. As our Lutheran Fathers proclaim for our peace,

“The power of the keys administers and offers the Gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the Gospel…Therefore we must believe the voice of the one absolving no less than we would believe a voice coming from heaven. Absolution may properly be called a sacrament of penance…” (Tappert 187:39-41).

Just as Jesus gives life by water in baptism. Just as His crucified victory stands behind bread and wine at the Sacrament. So also, the promising Word brings absolution by hiding in the voice of His called ministers. The Church hears its Savior even when a man who will die just the same proclaims, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins…”

Certainly, to proclaim peace means it is at last personal. Thomas was not with the disciples, but they gladly proclaimed the risen Lord to him. Like any unrepentant sinner, He rejected their words and went so far as to say, “I will never believe.” He belittled their faith, took away their joy, and turned them back towards fear. Instead of rebuking Thomas for his sin against the Gospel and not calling him to repentance. The disciples fell back into captivity over one sinner making threats. Thanks be to Jesus that He justifies all by grace through faith in Him apart from works. For eight days later, He again forgave them with the same absolving words, “Peace be with you.” Then He dealt with Thomas in a private form of confession. It was not to terrorize but teach him the truth. He said, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas saw his sin but heard His savior and said, “My Lord and My God.”

As special groups drag down society today, so the one shouting openly unrepentant sinner can destroy a whole Church. Like the disciples, the Savior still speaks forgiveness towards our lack of love as the body of Christ for today’s Thomas. We are not individuals in a Church separated from each other, but share the same Savior, same forgiveness for sins, and same baptismal faith. As one writer states,

“If the goal is to get people to go and find Christ, then the methods will be whatever we find (pragmatically) successful; if it’s all about Christ finding sinners, then the methods are already determined” (Christless Christianity 195).

Easter day was a rippling affect because Jesus had His presence and voice in it as the risen Savior. Everything He did was for peace to take away panic, to turn hearts to proclaim, and it was all very personal. The Church has life from the power of Jesus whose absolution sets us free to have peace in Him. Amen. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia. Amen.

1. http://www.pericope.org/buls-notes/john/john\_20\_19\_31.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)