

John 20:19-31

There was no sign out front, saying something like, “Jerusalem Christian Church.” There was nothing in the local newspaper inviting visitors to the Sunday morning service. Even if a visitor had shown up, he could not have gotten in because the doors were locked. And had someone been able to get in, he would have seen a pathetic bunch; a huddled group of frightened disciples.

Now I’m no expert in the field, but I’m quite sure that so-called church growth experts would agree that this is not a good way to grow the church. And they would surely also agree that such a church would not survive, but would soon be closing its doors for good. And yet this church in Jerusalem is where it all begins. This is where our roots are. Every Christian church today can trace its history back to this pathetic little group of disciples.

And this is how the Christian church had to begin to prove to us and to all the world that the church grows in spite of itself; that people don’t grow the church...God does. Our text is proof positive. Who in their right mind is going to want to join this sorry excuse for a congregation? “Come and join our church! We huddle together behind locked doors in fear each and every Sunday!” Can you imagine?

So what happened? How did this huddled, frightened group of disciples become the world-wide Christian church today? We can and should point to Pentecost. But let’s go back fifty days earlier to Easter evening. In the midst of this group of disciples, Jesus appears. And what He says and does sets everything in motion. Here is the Lord of the church...His church. This little congregation is afraid. They’re weak, hanging by a thread. It wouldn’t take much to dissolve this congregation and bring it to nothing. But here comes the Lord Jesus, and with a word He rescues His church.

So what word does He use? Which word does He give them? Before we answer that, let’s ponder a few words He might have said. He might have said, “Shame on you! Quit hiding. Pull yourselves together. You’ve got what it takes. Go out and build My church!” But He didn’t give this word to them. Not even close. Jesus might have given them words of instruction. How to live as Christians. How to move the church forward. How to be successful. But He did not give any such words as these either.

The word Jesus gives is so simple, and yet so profound. He says, “*Peace be with you.*” That’s it? Yeah, that’s it. Jesus gives His disciples the word of peace. But this word is everything and does everything. For the word of peace is nothing less than the word of absolution. Jesus appears to His weak, fearful disciples on Easter evening, and the first thing He says is, “I forgive you. Your sins, all of them, are forgiven.” (For this is the word of peace with God.)

Now don’t you think that this word is the last thing the disciples were expecting to hear? It’s the last thing I expect to hear when my heart, my conscience, my life is a sorry mess. But it’s the thing I need to hear most of all.

We spend six days of the week out in the world getting banged up. We rub shoulders with our neighbors, and sometimes that rubbing includes a little pushing and shoving. We have words with our spouse; words we wish we could take back. We have spats with our family. Unless you and everyone around you is perfectly holy, this is your life to some degree. And such things turn us into that huddled group of disciples. We tend to lock ourselves in. Not into our house necessarily, but into ourself. We

don't let others in; not even those we're closest to. And we don't let God in. We really don't want to hear what He has to say. We don't want a lecture; even though we know we need one.

But that's not what Jesus is about. He doesn't come to lecture His disciples. He doesn't come to shame them. He simply forgives them. That's the key...literally. We call it the Office of the Keys. Jesus turns the key unlocking the door of heaven to His weak, fearful disciples. And then He tells them to use this same key for others.

That was 2,000 years ago. And you know, that same key is being used today. What Jesus wants you to hear from the mouth of your pastor is not that your sins can be forgiven; not that He desires to forgive you; but very simply that your sins are forgiven. There are no strings attached. No conditions. Jesus forgives you. Not if you shape up and do better. Not if your confession is truly sincere and from your heart. Nothing we do is perfect, not even our confession. When Jesus appeared to His disciples on Easter evening, He did not first ask if they were really sincere. He did not give any qualifications at all. He simply opened His mouth and said, "I forgive you...*peace be with you.*"

Now there is one qualification. But Jesus met it for you. He suffered and died on the cross. For "there can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood." The Bible says this. So Jesus did; shed His blood for you. And He showed His disciples the proof of this: the marks of the nails and spear in His hands and side.

In a very wonderful way Jesus gives evidence of the same marks to us. He gives us physical realities to declare His sufferings and death for us; to convey to us His forgiveness. When Sapphira was baptized this morning, the word of peace was given to her. Her sins are declared forgiven in the water of Holy Baptism. Jesus turned the key for her, unlocking the door of heaven and giving to her a place there with Him. And because you are baptized, the same is true for you. On the altar today is the word of peace. Here is the proof that Jesus died and rose again for you. For here in His Sacrament He gives you the very body and blood that was crucified and now is glorified. As long as we have Jesus' forgiveness given in the word of absolution and the Sacraments, we are and remain His church.

Now I am aware that not all are to be forgiven. Those who refuse to repent of their sins are not to be absolved of their sins. The key must rather be turned in the opposite direction for them. "*If you withhold forgiveness from anyone,*" says Jesus in our text, "*it is withheld.*" But God wants all to repent and be saved. It is foreign to His nature to deal with stubborn sinners in this way. God loves to forgive most of all. And so I pray for each of you, as we pray for each other, that none of us here have a stubborn attitude, refusing to repent.

And because Jesus suffered, died, and rose again for each and every one of you, I am able to say with joy and certainty that each and every one of you is truly forgiven. God is at peace with all of you.

The last word you hear every Sunday in the Divine Service is the word of peace in the benediction. Listen for that word today. That word is for Sapphira. That word is for young and old, and everyone in between. That word is for you. This is how Jesus wants you to leave this house today. In peace with God. Believing you are absolved of your sin. And when you return next Sunday, after getting banged up in the world, that same word will be given to you. It never changes. God is always at peace with you. Jesus' marks are always in His hands and side for you. You are always His forgiven one. Amen.