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John 20:19-31
Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2021

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

Our text, Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During Holy Week, our meditation covered some common (and significant) Scriptural themes:

- the expectations regarding the King of Glory;
- the Words of the Lord’s New Testament with His people;
- the suffering of the Messiah and how that suffering both atones for you and serves as your example in suffering;
- the power of God in the cross and empty tomb to overcome death itself and usher in the resurrection.

Each of those themes – *all* of those themes – were our focus throughout that Holy Week... in part, a reminder that they also truly carried the events of history through that first Holy Week.

So then, when the risen Lord Jesus appears before his disciples on the night of his resurrection, bestows upon them divine peace, and wants to send them out with the forgiveness of sins to bestow upon the penitent and withhold the forgiveness of sins from the impenitent, you ought to consider that wrapped into that

administration of the Keys – very truly part and parcel of the Office of those Keys – are all those themes which Jesus brought through holy week and now wants to bestow upon His Church:

- **Expectations regarding the King of Glory** are wrong because of sin, but proper expectations will eagerly anticipate his ownership of and merciful conveyance to you of the forgiveness of sins.
- **The Words of the Lord’s Testament** must be *new*, because the *Old Testament* the people sinned against and broke, though God was a husband to them... but these words of the *New Testament* are words of the forgiveness of sins, and – with it – unity with God, life and salvation.
- **The suffering of the Messiah atones for you**, to be delivered to you in the forgiveness of sins, and the Messiah’s trust in the heavenly Father is example to you in your suffering at the hands of a sin-sick world that neither *seeks* nor *appreciates* the forgiveness of sins.
- **The power of God in the cross and empty tomb** overcomes death itself, ushers in the resurrection of the body, all because the cross solves *the root problem* – sin itself; and the power of the cross will patiently, throughout history to come (and ultimately on that last great day)... will reverse all the consequences of that sin and bring about the new creation that flows from the forgiveness of that Sin.

In other words, the one common bond between all those themes we’ve meditated upon in the days of that Holy Week – the one thing that ties them all together – is man’s bondage to sin and Christ’s freeing man from that bondage. How “spiritual” that little three-letter term “Sin” sounds in our ears; how “cerebral” we interpret it to be in our minds; but how manifest it is in daily life and

how objectively and truly it must be handled and dealt with before the throne of God Most High.

Perhaps this is why we find Jesus giving the Office of the Keys as the central part of that initial post-resurrection appearance to disciples who needed assurance they were dealing with a flesh-and-blood, tangibly and verifiably present risen Lord. If the risen Savior were a spiritual, ghostly, cerebral, irrelevant to daily-life matter, then so too the forgiveness of sins that he gives. But, as he comes before them and shows them their resurrected Lord is no mental, heartfelt notion, then neither is the forgiveness of sins that He gives and the peace that it affords.

Likewise with the disciple Thomas afterward – how willing our Lord is to nurse along Thomas' doubts and patiently bring him to full appreciation that Thomas was dealing with no mere mental matters or spiritual longings; Thomas was face-to-face with his tangible, manifest risen Lord... and thus the benefits of that risen Lord are also tangible, manifest.

Or, a simpler way to say it – just as man is not body or soul but both body and soul, so also he needs from His Messiah not only resurrection for the body, but forgiveness of sins for the soul... and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is resurrection... and body and soul together will know life everlasting.

Thus, when St John's gospel appeals directly to the reader and exhorts him to believe in this Jesus and all that John's gospel had

recorded about this Jesus, John's appeal is not to a faith that merely assents to the *possibility* of such things happening, nor to a faith that believes in *myths and legends*, but for a steadfastness and conviction in the benefit of flesh-and-blood salvation by a flesh-and-blood Savior in flesh-and-blood history *for* the tangible, objective benefit of the flesh-and-blood sinner before the holy God.

And, that same connection and appeal John makes to close out his *gospel* account of *Christ's* life, he also makes to begin his *epistle* regarding the *Church's* life. To be sure, the Church's life is spiritual; to be sure, it involves mysteries that are meditated upon in the head and believed on in the heart. But John's epistle again appeals to the flesh-and-blood reality, not only of our Savior, but of the benefits of his Gospel in our daily lives – all flowing from the forgiveness of sins.

Thus, John begins his epistle (today's epistle reading) with an appeal that sounds not only like the beginning of his gospel, but also as if he's intentionally reminding his hearers of that great scene of the risen Jesus before His disciples in the Upper Room. John says,

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.”

Doesn't the first few lines of that epistle sound like the Upper Room in those near-final words of John's gospel! – the gospel spoke of them seeing, hearing, their risen Lord... Thomas even touching his hands and side; and now the epistle reminds us again, "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands." Yes, John says, we know this to be objectively, tangibly, "incarnationally" flesh-and-blood true. And yet, *what* is true (that this spiritual mystery of godliness – this "word of life" – has come from the heavens and been made manifest, made flesh and blood)... that sounds a lot like the *beginning* of John's gospel, doesn't it? - that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Why is that of any importance if the benefit is all cerebral wishful thinking, fanciful myth, and irrelevant to daily life?

But the benefit is not merely spiritual "wishful thinking." Just as the Savior has been made flesh, then so has our salvation been made tangible in the crucifixion and resurrection of that Savior and in the Baptism, the Keys, and the Supper that Savior bestows upon his Church.

And, as he bestows it tangibly upon the faithful – so that we can hear the means of grace at work, see them at work, touch them at work... such manifest **benefit** manifestly brings **fellowship** – fellowship in the spiritual and cerebral matters of faith – "the mystery of godliness we profess", Paul calls it – but matters of faith

that play out in flesh-and-blood reality and thus bring our fellowship out of the shadows of spirituality into the manifest appearance of daily life. Our fellowship is with one another, but not only with *one another*, but also truly – though invisibly – with *the Father and with his Son*... and such a divine, spiritual fellowship makes our joy complete... a complete joy to live in and dwell in all the days of our flesh-and-blood life (even a flesh-and-blood life afflicted in flesh-and-blood ways in this sin-sick world!), a joy that will give birth to the greater joy of the countless days of our flesh-and-blood resurrection and the flesh-and-blood life of the world to come.

But, to benefit from such eternal things tangibly, we need the forgiveness of sins. Indeed, when Jesus appeared to the twelve and showed them his hands and side and the wondrous truth of the Resurrection, it's as if he said, "I want My Church to gain this benefit. I want them to share in the Resurrection of the Body! So put their hopes in and center their focus on the forgiveness of sins, and believe on him who has purchased that forgiveness of sins and knows nothing more splendid in the heavens than the forgiveness of sins." What a glorious byproduct of Christ's atoning death, to unlock all of heaven... that application of Christ's redemption that may not be visible, may not seem tangible, but is very much manifested in and for daily life. Consider in the rest of the text of the epistle how the description of such fellowship and forgiveness may sound "spiritual" and "heavenly", but it is intermingled in John's own

description with a very tangible wrestling, a very manifest benefit of forgiveness, a very visible effect upon daily life and conduct. John says it this way:

“God is light and in him is no darkness at all (that sounds quite ‘spiritual’, but...) If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness (manifest conduct), we lie and do not practice the truth (tangible). But if we walk (flesh-and-blood) in the light, as he is in the light (spiritual), we have fellowship with one another (tangible *and* spiritual), and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (today, spiritual; one final day – flesh-and-blood reality).

So, is that a spiritual myth and legend, or is it the flesh-and-blood reality of what Christ does for us before the throne of grace?

In other words, when the forgiveness of sins is declared over you, tangibly in the heavenly places, your sins are being erased from the divine ledger and your guilt is being removed from the scales of divine judgment. What is being declared here audibly and visibly is just as “visible and audible” (if you will) in the heavenly courts. As Luther says it in the Small Catechism, “Our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.”

Such wondrous comfort, such freeing declaration and – with it, a joyfully free and clear conscience before the Almighty – cannot tangibly, truly, manifestly be yours if such is not actually happening in the heavens. And such cannot actually be happening in the heavens if we do not have a flesh-and-blood risen and ascended Lord Jesus advocating in realtime before and with the Father. But we *do*

have a flesh-and-blood risen Savior, and he did not only burst from the tomb but ascended into the heavens... the twelve heard him, saw him, touched him and recorded it that you might believe yours is the benefit.

And that means you do have in the heavens an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous... the same Jesus who once tangibly gave his life as a ransom, the same Jesus who was heard, seen, touched in his manifest flesh-and-blood resurrection glory... that same Jesus today is tangibly before the throne of grace on your behalf, showing his Father his hands and side and pleading with the Father... a most gentle pleading before the Father who has adopted you as His own, made you his child, and graciously showers that forgiveness of sins upon you...

... that forgiveness so important for you, so beneficial for you, that Jesus appears to his disciples and points them to the chief benefit for all of history – that they may bestow that forgiveness upon you very truly, manifestly, tangibly – even in the heavenly places – every time those precious words are declared to you: “I forgive you your sins.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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April 11, 2021