

Christ Has Given You a Set of Keys!
Sermon based on John 20:22-23
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
Pastor Karl Walther
October 3, 2004

The Apostle John once wrote: *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* Amen.

God's Word to us this morning, as we begin our October sermon series on "the Office of the Keys", is John chapter twenty, verses twenty-two and twenty-three:

Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

This is God's Spirit-inspired Word from the lips of Jesus Christ himself.

Introduction: Keys Carry a Privilege & a Responsibility

Dear fellow Christians—who have in your hands and hearts Keys from Christ:

How many of you have a set of keys along with you this morning? Raise your hands! Better yet: if your keys are halfway handy, get them out right now. Seriously: get them out. Okay, now let's all jingle them together!

Yeah, I know that was a little goofy. But there was a purpose to it. Today, God wants you thinking hard about keys. So, I wanted you to see some keys and touch some keys and hear some keys.

Now, consider a set of keys. Keys always carry a privilege and a responsibility, don't they? Take my keys, for example. These four keys are for our two vehicles; I have the privilege of driving them, and I have the responsibility to maintain them. These two keys are for my house and garage. I have the privilege to enter them, and I have the responsibility to pay for them. And these two keys are for the church and school. I have the privilege to enter them, too, but I also have the responsibility to work at church—and to do everything I can to benefit you when I work here.

Theme: Christ Has Given You a Set of Keys!

Now, did you know that each of us has a set of keys? Jesus once said to Peter, and then later he said to all Christians: *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.* Today, on the basis of this Word from God, we're going to consider together the privilege it is to have keys to the kingdom of heaven—and also our responsibility to use them.

Part One: Christ's Holy Spirit Unlocked Heaven for You!

Have you ever been locked out of a place you really wanted to get into? That's terrible, isn't it?! A month ago I locked my keys in my car, while the radio was still on. Well, I had some people I needed to visit in my office –it was a good visit; it always is! – but I was agitated at myself, until I walked home, got some keys, and returned to get into my car. A couple weeks ago, my son and I were going to a Packers game. The tickets were locked in my sister's house in Oshkosh. Until I found the key she was giving me, got in, and found the tickets, I had this nagging fear of being locked out of the game.

So, being locked out of a place ranges from agitating to downright dreadful. Well, you and I were once locked out—locked out of heaven. The rebellious attitude

toward God that we were born with, and the many times that attitude took action in our lives—those sins locked us dirty, filthy sinners out of God’s clean house of paradise.

But – thank God! – we’ve experienced what Jesus’ disciples experienced: one Sunday evening, Easter Sunday evening, behind locked doors, in a house in Jerusalem, the day our Savior rose from the dead.

God’s Holy Word informs us: *Jesus breathed on his disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* Just the way, some six thousand years ago, the Lord breathed into the lungs of our very-great-grandpa Adam, and his lifeless clay body became alive to live his nine hundred thirty years—so now. Now Christ – twelve hours ago breathless in death, now full of life – breathed into his disciples the breath of life, and the Holy Spirit gave them life eternal.

And Jesus has done the same for you! Yeah, when you took your first breath in this world, you already had one less breath to go until the day you died. But probably almost as long ago, Jesus breathed into your soul the breath of life – “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” in baptism – and you rose to life, body and soul, a life that will last forever.

Or to put it another way: Jesus opened the kingdom of heaven to you and all believers. Jesus unlocked paradise for you. You were outside. You were miserable. You were desperate. And Jesus came to your side. He lifted you up. He said, “Here, let me open that door for you! Come on inside! Come on into the light! Come to the celebration! Join the party! Join the fun! I’ve thrown open to you the doors of paradise!”

What a privilege! What a privilege to have in our pockets – to have in our hearts – the very keys to paradise!

Part Two: Christ’s Holy Spirit Has You Unlock Heaven for Others

Of course, keys are meant to be used.... Have you ever come up to a building, a building to which you had the keys, and friends of yours were at the door wanting to get in, and you got to let them in? Feels good, doesn’t it?! That happens to me every so often. I’m walking back to work at night. And as I walk up the sidewalk I see a group at the door. Often it’s Girl Pioneers. And they’re desperate. They don’t have a key. And I say, “Hey I’ll let you in.” And that’s simple enough; I have the key. And voilà! you get to be a hero-of-sorts, just because you’ve got a key and you get to use it.

Well, that’s the way it is for us. We’ve got the keys to the kingdom of heaven—Christ; he’s the key to the kingdom of heaven! Christ unlocks heaven for us! And he unlocks heaven for others, too. So, we get to experience what the disciples did: in that Jerusalem house on that first Easter evening.

Jesus said: *“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* Better translated: *“If you cancel anyone his shortfalls, they are cancelled; if you hold them against him, they are held against him.”* Christ’s keys are meant to be used! Now that Christ has unlocked paradise for us, he wants us unlocking – and locking – paradise for others.

But on what basis? Do we unlock heaven for people we like—and lock it up for people we don’t? No! Do we unlock heaven for the good looking people, for the smart people, for the wealthy people—and lock it up for the others? No!

Instead, as the Bible says: *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.* So, whenever we find a sinner who acknowledges her sinfulness, we unlock heaven for her through Jesus. And whenever we find a sinner who won’t own up to his need for a

Savior, we lock up heaven for him—hoping the Holy Spirit will then prompt him to see his need for Jesus.

Now let me ask you: How much do you do this? How often do you remind people who don't trust Jesus how serious their sins are and how much they need to lay them out before Jesus? And more to the point: When someone says to you, "I'm sorry!" how often do you say, "Hey, I forgive you, and Jesus forgives you, too"?

Well, I want to encourage you to do that. And to help you, I want to finish with a couple good examples of using the keys Christ gave you, and also a couple bad examples.

First: a couple good examples that I hope encourage you to lay your sins out to be forgiven by God and by others.

Almost twenty years ago, I started Seminary. At Seminary, one of the first things you do is to study a part of the Scriptures in its original language and present your findings. And then one of your classmates responds to your presentation. Well, I remember making a presentation – and it was a decent one – and this guy is supposed to respond. And he tears me apart. He basically says, "As much as you missed in this text, I don't think you'll ever be able to be a pastor." Other guys actually came up to me afterwards and said, "Man, he was way out of line."

Well, do you know what happened? That night he called me. And he said, "I'm sorry. I was way out of line." And I said, "I forgive you. And you know, Jesus forgives you." And we talked some more. And you know what? We were some of the best of friends for the rest of Seminary, and we're still friends today.

Do you see the power of the keys?! Do you see the power of forgiveness from Christ—both eternally, and also here?!

I'll give you another good example—and more contemporary. There's this guy I play tennis with. It's humbling, because he's speedier, taller, younger, and better looking than I am. But I do kind of usually beat him. Experience, trickery and guile beats youth and athleticism! Anyway, my tennis partner has a way of getting just a tiny bit frustrated—just a little bit mad. But I've really got to respect the guy, because every time that happens – every time! – he later says, "I'm sorry". And I say, "Hey, I forgive you. And of course, Jesus forgives you."

And you know what? That takes care of it. And the next week we play tennis again, and we don't even think about the previous week. And one of these summers, I won't be able to compete with the kid anymore. Anyway, do you see the power of forgiveness—forgiveness from Christ and from Christians, forgiveness now and eternally?

And then there are a couple bad examples I can think of—that I hope always remind you to forgive other people.

There's this acquaintance of mine. No, none of you knows who this individual is—honest! A couple of years ago I wronged this individual. I neglected to ask this individual's preferences on a project we were working on together. When I found out how I had wronged this individual, I said, "Hey, I'm really sorry. Will you forgive me?" And this individual didn't. And I asked again. And this individual didn't forgive me!

Of course, fortunately Jesus did!!! But this acquaintance of mine missed the opportunity to heal the harm that had come between us.

Another example—and again: more contemporary. My tennis partner I was telling you about—well, he's a fairly good long distance runner. One time he was running a long race, and in the sprint at the end I guess he got in somebody else's way—and actually the other guy ended up plowing into him. Well, I've got to give my tennis partner credit. To the guy who plowed into him, he said, "Hey, I'm sorry I got in your way." He even apologized to the guy's coach. And do you know how the coach reacted?

He said, and I quote, “That was a dastardly thing you did! Somebody could have gotten hurt! That was dastardly, young man!”

Well, that coach is a guy who apparently needs to learn something about the keys!

I mean: if somebody sins against you, forgive him! And tell him that Jesus forgives him, too! And if you sin against somebody, say to him, “I’m sorry. I wronged you. Will you forgive me?” And then experience the healing power of forgiveness. Experience anew the joy of the kingdom of heaven—as Jesus unlocks it for you and for others.

Conclusion: Keys from Christ Are Better Than Any Others

So, there you have it. Jesus has given you a set of keys. First of all, Christ’s Holy Spirit unlocked heaven for you. And now Christ’s Holy Spirit has you unlock heaven for others.

And think of how wonderful Christ’s keys are. Normal keys get lost; these keys are always there for the finding in God’s Word. Normal keys unlock earthly doors; Christ’s keys unlock heaven’s door. Normal keys you don’t dare give away to just anyone; Christ’s keys you want to give away to everyone—and you won’t even be minus your own set for doing so.

Normal keys eventually wear out and need replacement. These keys – Christ’s keys to the kingdom of heaven – will never wear out, until that day they open heaven’s door to you eternally. Amen.

The Apostle John once wrote: *We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* Amen.