

April 7, 2024 (Easter 2 B)

John 20:21-23

“Christ hands over the KEYS!”

Have you ever had the experience of handing over the car keys to their teenager for the first time and saying, **“OK – take the keys, you drive!”** How would you describe that experience? *Scary . . . overwhelming . . . perhaps a little bit humbling . . .* This child is growing up and this is yet another big milestone toward independence – one day – *soon* – they will be off on their own, and you pray that they would make good decisions, be safe on the roads, and do what is right and honorable.

Last week we celebrated the resurrection of our Lord and Savior from the dead. The work God had given Him was complete. He faced the penalty for all our sin and guilt and paid the price in FULL. It was accomplished. Salvation has been won. He then rose from the dead in victory. Today we see Him appearing to the disciples (who were still hiding in fear behind locked doors) and – ***Christ hands over the KEYS to them!*** *“OK guys, it’s time for you to drive! Here you go!”*

We’re just going to focus on one paragraph of our Gospel Lesson for today, because there is SO MUCH packed into these few short verses of **John 20:21-23** (NIV). First of all He said (verse 21): **“Peace be with you!”** He comes not in anger, terror or judgment. He does not yell at them for denying Him and running away in fear, or for hiding behind locked doors. He comes in PEACE – the peace that He Himself established by the sacrifice He made. Jesus made peace between a Holy God and sinful people – and that peace means we can dwell in God’s home forever. All our sin and guilt has been atoned for. Easter is a season of pure JOY.

There – in that peace of forgiveness . . . He goes on: **“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”** Jesus had a job to do – God sent Him to be the Savior of mankind, and He did his job perfectly. Now He throws the keys to his disciples and says, *“Now it’s YOUR turn – you’ve got a **job to do**: YOU are going to take the wheel and carry on God’s work as my representatives!”*

Overwhelming? Scary? you bet. So, He does something rather amazing for them: **22 And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”** That Greek word

ἐμφυσάω might sound familiar to you – it’s the basis for our English word “Emphysema, and it’s only used ONE time in the Bible. It simply means “to breathe”. I found it interesting because when the Old Testament was translated into Greek (known as the *Septuagint* – it was completed a century or two before the time of Jesus) . . . they chose THAT word to translate **Genesis 2:7** from Hebrew into Greek: ***“The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”***

What Jesus does here, as the Author of Life, is give us a beautiful picture of how God works. He **breathed** life into us – both physical AND spiritual life. It also reminds us of **Ezekiel 37** where God made the same point to Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones. We come into this world physically alive, but spiritually dead. The power of the Holy Spirit breathes life into us and gives us the gifts God wants us to have. The Holy Spirit had given them peace, forgiveness, salvation, spiritual life – and He would give them extra supernatural gifts at Pentecost. Again, it might have started like the sound of BREATH – but was magnified to the sound of a violent **wind** – when the Holy Spirit gave them those miraculous gifts on that special day.

But, notice what **gift** came with the Spirit here on that first Easter Sunday: **23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.** This is what theologians refer to as: the doctrine of the Keys. It’s the ability to forgive sins to the repentant, and to withhold forgiveness from those who do not repent of their sins. Essentially it unlocks and opens the door to heaven – or – it closes it and locks it for those who do not trust in Christ or repent of their sins.

The followers of Jesus would carry on the work of bringing Jesus’ forgiveness, peace, and salvation out to the lost souls of this world – ***He was handing over the KEYS to them.*** *Yikes – are they ready for this??* They still thought He was going to establish an earthly, physical Kingdom. They were hiding from the outside world behind locked doors in fear. They were just ordinary people with ordinary lives. They were certainly NOT up to the task. Yet, Jesus doesn’t seem to have any apprehension or fear at all as He hands over the KEYS to these people. In fact, He seems **delighted** to do it, and excited to entrust the world’s most important work to *them*. Jesus saw the big picture and He knew what great things they would accomplish

for the Kingdom of God – even as they sat there afraid to leave that locked room. They received the gifts and tools they needed at Pentecost. They did their work and took the salvation of Jesus out to the world. You can read all about it in the book of **Acts**.

*Guess whom God has handed over the KEYS to now? I'll give you a hint: they have peace with God through Jesus. Their sins are forgiven. They believe that Jesus has risen from the dead and is our victorious Savior and the only way to heaven. If that's you – then **Christ has handed over the KEYS to you!** You have been given the most powerful tools in the world – to do the most important work in the universe – that has eternal consequences for the eternal souls of mankind!*

Yikes! We're just ordinary people with ordinary lives. We're busy with other things. We've got jobs, and families, and responsibilities. We're comfortable here – behind the doors of our church – worshipping Christ, but we're often afraid to shine the light of God's truth out *THERE!* We're often afraid to stick our necks out, afraid to be inconvenienced, afraid to suffer. We want money / success / happiness *HERE* – that's where we pour the bulk of our efforts and energy. That's why we keep our money to ourselves – we want to save up and buy the things that we think will make us happy. We are **sinful** people that are simply not up to the task. *Why would He throw the KEYS to us?*

I don't know. But He has. You have been given life by the Holy Spirit through the powerful Word of God, and at your baptism when you were given life / peace / forgiveness by that same Spirit Jesus gave those disciples on that first Easter Sunday. We have been given the same **job**, and we have the same **tools**:

- The **WORD**: it's powerful, we use it to show the world who God is and what He's done for us in Christ. The Word brings us to our knees in repentance, and then brings us new life / forgiveness, meaning, purpose, drive, and salvation.
- **BAPTISM**: Here God connects souls to Christ. Through baptism the Holy Spirit breathes life, forgiveness, and salvation into our souls.
- The **LORD'S SUPPER**: Here Jesus connects with us in yet another special way. And so, we use and administer this gift carefully and in line with the principles He has given us.

- The **KEYS**: We have and use the power to open or close the door to heaven because God has given us this incredible tool to build His Kingdom. Here we come together with repentant hearts and confess our sins to God – and – we hear from the called representative that our sins and guilt is totally and completely forgiven – and – **it really is!**

*Could you imagine if we had the power to clear out **credit card debt** in the same way we have to clear out **spiritual debt**? The line ups would be atrocious! Attendance for worship would be beyond incredible! Especially if you had a rough week and all sorts of unexpected expenses hit your family – well (you'd say), you've GOT to get to church THIS Sunday! That power would be nothing in comparison with what we actually do have. Every week we rack up an incredible amount of spiritual debt. We can try to ignore it or pretend it's no big deal – but it is. It strangles our lives and puts distance between us and our Holy God. Thankfully, we have, and use, the **KEYS** – we are brought to repentance and forgiven. Over and over and over again. And, that tool is not just for us here at church, it's for us to **use** out there in the world.*

*How are we supposed to use the **KEYS** in our daily lives? I'll show you a simple way we can do that: when someone sins against you / hurts you / offends you / upsets you – and they acknowledge it and apologize to you – what do people normally say in response? (normally they say: It's OK – forget it.) That's a worldly way of looking at it. It's NOT OK. Try this response instead: "I forgive you." And – (if that person is a believer in Jesus) add: "**God** forgives you too." Here's a radical twist I challenge you to try: If a professed unbeliever apologizes to you for something, respond: "I forgive you. But, God does NOT forgive you." **WHAT?!** That would make us stick out. *Good.* People will ask us what we mean by that. *Good.* People might get offended. *Good.* It turns every time someone apologizes into a teachable moment and a priceless opportunity to use this incredible tool that God has given us. *Good.* Try it out.*

God has handed the KEYS to you. It is overwhelming. We feel (and ARE) totally unworthy to be God's representatives in this world. It is humbling. It can be daunting. But – our Savior doesn't hesitate at all. With a smile on His face He throws the **KEYS** to you! He sees the big picture, and He knows the great things YOU modern disciples are going to accomplish for His Kingdom.