

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It seems a bit odd. We're in the season of Easter. *"Christ is risen! Alleluia! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!"* *"Now His grace to us imparts Eternal sunshine to our hearts; The night of sin is ended! Alleluia!"* Why are we talking about forgiving sins and withholding forgiveness? It's no longer the somber season of Lent, with its focus on repentance, with us receiving that ashen cross on our forehead, confessing our sins, confessing that we are mortal, made from dust and will return to dust.

And yet, here we are on the night of Jesus' resurrection, and passing through doors closed and locked *"for fear of the Jews,"* Jesus stands in the midst of the disciples and announces *"peace."* It's an absolution, just like we heard on Ash Wednesday, and like we hear all the time. Peace with God comes from God. What the Father willed, the Son accomplished. *"Peace be with you,"* Jesus said, and then showed the disciples his hands and side, the wounds He sustained for your peace. Yes, peace with God was earned by Jesus' cross, as the Prophet Isaiah foretold: *"he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."*

On this night of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples not only saw that the tomb was empty and believed the women's testimony that Jesus was no longer in the tomb. Now they were glad and believed, for they had seen with their own eyes what they once thought *"an idle tale."* Now they understood what Jesus had been telling them and what the Scriptures foretold: although the Christ would suffer at the hands of sinful men and be crucified, He would rise again on the third day — more than that, *"he must rise from the dead,"* that we might not any longer be mired *"in our sins,"* crushed by the Law of Moses, but at peace with God, living in the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

*"Peace be with you."* Jesus said it again. You are forgiven, disciples, of your sins of weakness and fear and doubt. *"Peace be with you."* Jesus said it again eight days later, this time in the presence of Thomas, who was not convinced by the disciples' united voices, *"We have seen the Lord."* *"Peace be with you,"* Jesus said to Thomas. That is, *"Even your unbelief has been atoned for by my wounds. Receive your forgiveness through faith. Stop rejecting me in unbelief. Believe."*

Yes, absolution is not just the message of Ash Wednesday, or repentance and absolution the message of the season of Lent. This message is also the Easter message. It's today's message of peace that rings in our ears three times. It's part of next Sunday's message, Jesus forgiving and restoring Peter in a three-fold absolution. It's the message that Luke records that Jesus leaves to His church: to preach *"repentance and forgiveness of sins ... in his name."*

But more than preach it, Jesus sends His church out to distribute forgiveness of sins — to bestow it. Even as the Father sent the Son down from heaven to be sin's ransom, so the Son sends out the church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, with this forgiveness on her breath. That is, she gathers around God's word and sacraments — disciples do — to breathe in what Jesus breathed on her: His Spirit, the word of forgiveness by His blood. And then she is sent out to breathe it back out on others. She is sent, as her Lord was sent, not to be served but to serve as our Lord did, not giving our lives as a bloody sacrifice, but our bodies as living sacrifices: preaching, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing, leading, loving, and so much more ... especially forgiving as we have been forgiven.

And so Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”* And Luther explains this passage in the catechism on the Office of the Keys. The Keys are Christ's. In the epistle, we hear the resurrected Jesus say, *“I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”* And we know that even before this sending forth of the disciples on the night of His resurrection, Jesus had said to the church through Peter, *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* Thus we call it the Office of the Keys, and Luther explains it saying, *“The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.”*

Of course, even as we acknowledge that this authority has been given to the church, so we also acknowledge that the church ordinarily exercises this authority by calling pastors to forgive sins on her behalf publicly. Indeed, the forgiveness spoken by your pastor is not dependant upon his faith or holiness — what a sandy foundation that would be — but upon solid rock of Christ Himself, upon the office of pastor instituted by Christ, and upon the authority of the church that placed the pastor into this office. Thus, the pastor begins the absolving words saying, *“Upon this your confession, I by virtue of my Office as a called and ordained servant of the Word,”* that is, by the authority which Christ placed in the Office of the Ministry which He gave the church.

And as you have called me to this pastoral office at Zion, I will not be deterred from preaching to you the forgiveness of sins and bestowing them upon you, from the absolution at the beginning of the service, to the forgiveness proclaimed in the sermon, to the remission offered up by eating and drinking Christ's body and blood, to the peace pronounced at the conclusion of that meal, even though I have received complaints about it, wanting me to cease and desist— no, not from well-

catechized Zion members, but from others at weddings and other occasional services. *“Who do you think you are?”* they’ll accuse. *“You’re just a man. Why do you think you’re good enough to forgive sins? ‘Only God can forgive sins.’”*

And they don’t usually want to hear the Biblical answer. But the Lord Himself says, *“Fear not!”* And through the apostles, especially Peter and John, we are encouraged and given words, *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”* This is how the apostles responded when they were told to stop preaching Christ crucified and risen from the dead, and to stop teaching in Jesus’ name. And when they didn’t stop, they were arrested. But that didn’t stop them, either. As we heard in our first lesson, released from prison by an angel, they went right away the next morning to the temple and began to teach about Jesus. Brought then before the council again and reminded of the strict command to stop this preaching, Peter and the apostles replied, *“We must obey God rather than men,”* then proclaimed Christ crucified and risen. And they concluded, *“God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”*

The men who weeks earlier had cowered in fear in a locked room, unburdened of their sins by Jesus’ simple words of absolution, *“Peace be with you,”* now fearlessly went forth with the same message on their lips. It’s not just a message of Lent; it’s the message of the church living in Easter triumph, Easter joy.

This is who we are as church today, and we have been given a message to proclaim. *“We cannot but speak”* it, though there are many reasons to be fearful as Christians today: the genocide being committed by ISIS in the Middle East, last week’s Easter massacre in Pakistan, the efforts in the US to *“undermine the status of freedom of conscience”* protections, especially religious liberty protections, for new LGBT policies—or maybe nothing quite so dire, but fearful about offending someone.

Let us heed Jesus’ words, *“Fear not.”* Let us live in the peace He won and He bestows. And let us go forth, having been sent, with the same words of forgiveness on our lips, for we are Easter people. We trust the words of John’s Gospel and the rest of Scripture. We believe that Jesus is Lord and God, the Christ, the Son of God. We believe that God raised Him from the dead. We know He lives, and we know we have life in His name. Having been built up then by *“the pure spiritual milk”* of His word and Sacraments, God grant you zeal in your confession and faith and proclamation.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen. Alleluia. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia.