

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 11, a.D. 2010

John 20: 19 - 31

Thomas was not there the night Jesus first appeared to his disciples. It took the visible signs of the resurrection in order for Thomas to believe. When our risen Lord held up his scarred hands and showed his scarred side, then Thomas believed. These are still the marks visible in our Lord's body, even now, which comfort us and assure us that our Lord, fully human and divine, still holds the marks by which we are forgiven, and so enjoy his peace.

Would you think it odd if I stood outside a church and asked those entering, "How do you know this is a church?" Interestingly enough, we could find gift shops, thrift shops, and food services in a number of them, too! I walked into the main entrance of an Oshawa church and found no difference between what I saw and a Tim Horton's franchise. The people there obviously believe that providing such things *is* the mission of the church!

Our Lutheran Confessions teach that the marks of the Church are the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with that pure Gospel teaching (*Apology*, Articles VII and VIII: Of the Church). Martin Luther counted seven marks of the Church, including, among others, the use of the Keys: "The people of God, or holy Christians, are known by the Keys, which they publicly use. Christ decrees in Matthew 18 that if a Christian sins, he shall be rebuked, and if he does not amend his ways, he shall be bound and cast out; but if he amends, he shall be set free. This is the power of the Keys . . . Now wherever you see the sins of some persons forgiven or rebuked, publicly or privately, know that God's people are there . . . Christ has bequeathed them as a public mark and a holy possession, whereby the Holy Ghost, won through Christ's death, imparts holiness anew to fallen sinners and by them Christians confess that they are a holy people, under Christ in this world; and those who will not be converted and made holy again are to be cast out of this holy people; that is, they are to be bound and excluded by means of the Keys (*On the Councils and the Church*, 1539, AE 41).

The marks of the church point toward the mission. Luther could include the Keys as a mark of the Church because, along with the Gospel and Sacraments, it pertains directly to the Church's mission.

The church's mission is found in the words Jesus spoke to the disciples after His resurrection near the end of John's Gospel. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.' And with that He breathed on them 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.'" (John 20:21-23) These words describe the inner work that God's Spirit accomplishes as the Church outwardly baptizes and teaches in Christ's name.

What aim stands behind the Church's baptizing and teaching? Forgiveness of sins. Everything that the Church does has to do with forgiving people their sins. Its pastors baptize in the name of the Triune God for the forgiveness of sins. The congregation gathers around the altar to receive the body and blood of Jesus that was "given and shed for the remission of sins." Scripture is studied because its words offer life and forgiveness. The Keys are used to impart the forgiveness of sins to the penitent. Even unrepentant sinners are excluded in the hope that they will repent and be restored. So all that Jesus taught and that the Church is to do in His Name centers on the forgiveness of sins in one way or another.

When pastors fail to rebuke sin, they fall under God's warning as given through Ezekiel: "When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable" (Ezekiel 33:8). Pastors and elders need to keep their old nature's desire to be liked in check. The Church dare not shy away from dealing with sin in the mistaken hope that it will thereby attract more people.

On the other hand, when pastors abuse the Keys by administering them too harshly, they are not acting properly either. St. Paul writes, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Galatians 6:1). Those whose sin is not a willful rebellion are to be handled with gentleness, just as Priscilla and Aquilla privately corrected Apollos about his inadequate teaching on Baptism (Acts 18:26). When pastors

condemn as sin that which is not sin, they abuse the Keys as well. Jesus admonished the Pharisees for teaching as doctrine that which was only tradition (Mark 7:7). Pastors and elders may also need to use the power of Baptism to keep in check the old nature's desire to lord it over others, or to use the Keys as a way of settling a score or winning an argument. The Church through its pastors also has the responsibility to forgive the penitent, for that is what the Keys are all about! This means that whatever was done wrong is not brought up against that person in the future. It means that no record of wrongs is kept either, as Jesus teaches when Peter asked, "Lord how many times must I forgive my brother when he sins against me?" (Matthew 18:21).

The entire congregation of God has a responsibility when it is on the receiving end of admonition. Those admonished, either clergy or laity, have a duty to receive correction with all humility. We do well to pray with the psalmist, "Test my heart, O Lord; search my motives" (Psalm 139:23). For correction and rebuke are designed only to put the straying back on the path of righteousness. The pastor who receives correction with all humility sets for himself a valuable model for the congregation to imitate when they need to be corrected.

Still, the Church's mission is all about sin and its forgiveness. Because God does not desire the death of anyone, He has given to the Church the means to deal with sin, and these means are the marks that point to where the Church may be found. That troubled hearts may be comforted, that the wicked may be duly warned and brought to repentance, may the Church continue publicly and privately to exercise the Keys and show itself faithful to its Lord and Saviour.

For Christ Jesus continues to hold up the marks of our salvation in his human flesh for our forgiveness!