

The Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-31

For all I know, although they do use different phrasings, all Lutheran Church orders order that on this day, the Second Sunday of Easter, the topic of preaching is to be the office and authority of Pastors.

And it would seem only natural, would it not, that this is what would be preached and taught on this day, in light of what we just heard from the Gospel reading appointed for today, our Lord Jesus announcing to His Apostles that *as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you!* and: *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you bind the sins of any, they are bound.*

Naturally, though, some would rather turn their attention to Thomas, how he did not believe that our Lord Jesus was indeed risen from death until our Lord Jesus appeared to him, also, as to the others, and then said to him: *Because you have seen me, you have believed? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.* This offers an opportunity to chastise Christians who struggle with doubt and uncertainty, and admonish them that they need to work harder on themselves so as to feel the presence of God in their hearts, and in their lives. Although, actually, it was not that Thomas had *doubts*, was it, as if he had not yet been fully convinced; rather, as we hear it today that he said it: *I will by no means believe!* And actually, also, Thomas never did convince himself, did he, rather, our Lord Jesus appeared to him. But then, to those more concerned with the emotional impact of their preaching than with the Truth of God, what Holy Scripture says rarely gets in the way of making those who take the faith seriously enough to struggle with it feel bad about not being better Christians. So there is that.

At any rate, when we Lutherans hear the words of our Lord Jesus about the authority of the Apostles, that *if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you bind the sins of any, they are bound*, most of us are likely, I think, to think of private confession and absolution, that is: when a Christian will confess his sins to his Pastor, and the Pastor will announce to him that his sins are forgiven, unless he makes it clear to his Pastor that he is *not* a Christian, that he has no intention of giving up behaviours and beliefs that are contrary to the Word of God, and that he will not be taught by the man God has set to teach him. In that case the Pastor must warn him that he is on a path that will lead to Hell unless he will turn away from it and return to the Lord who is gracious and merciful.

Now, the authority to forgive the sins of the penitent and to bind the arrogant and ungodly in their sin, it does indeed pertain to private confession and absolution; but it does not pertain *only* to that.

The risen Lord Jesus came to His Apostles, as we hear it today, and pronounced His peace to be upon them, and showed them His hands and side.

Now, the English language does not really allow us to hear quite how tight the connection is between our Lord Jesus pronouncing His peace to be upon them and Him showing them His hands and side; although, for those who know, it pretty much presents itself. Showing them His hands and side, our Lord Jesus was bringing His sufferings and death in remembrance, that He had been nailed to a cross, and that a spear had pierced His side to give proof that He was indeed dead.

And it was with His crucifixion and death He had procured the peace He pronounced upon them. Having had Himself born into sinful Mankind and baptised into the sin of all sinners, the Son of God had had Himself made one with the sin of all sinners. And having been made one with the sin of all sinners He had had Himself crucified, hung up high in shame, to be cursed and condemned by the righteous wrath of God against sin, the hatred of His holiness against all things evil and unclean. And now, there He was among them to pronounce His peace upon them. He is no longer dead, who died for the sin of the world. With His sufferings and death the judgement of God against sin has been fulfilled, all sin dealt with and done away, and so sinners are at peace with God and shall not die for ever in His wrath but rather live with Him, in His love.

This is what Christian worship is: our Lord Jesus coming to His own to pronounce His peace to be upon us on account of His sufferings and death. This is what the holy Apostle John points out by mentioning not only the closed doors, but also that this happened on the first day of the week, the day of Christian worship, and again the following Sunday, when the disciples were again gathered.

And the manner in which He now comes to His Church and His Christians to pronounce His peace upon us is through the Word He has His servants speak, which is His own Word, spoken through them by Himself, with which He breathes out the Spirit, who is His very own life and breath.

Receive the Holy Spirit, as we hear it today that He said it; if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you bind the sins of any, they are bound. This pertains not only to private and personal conversations between Pastor and parishioner, but also to public preaching.

The Word of His salvation, which He has His servants speak for Him, is *the Word which has the power to save your souls*, as James writes it, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is His Word of how the salvation of God has been brought to completion with His sufferings and death, full forgiveness for all sin, rescue from eternal death and damnation, eternal life with Him in the fullness of the glory of God. And because His salvation is full and complete, so that there is nothing lacking, nothing left to be done, His Word is His *promise* of salvation, with which all that He promises is given, really given, out of His mercy alone, and for no other reason whatsoever, to all who hear it, and surrender to His salvation in the obedience of faith.

As we also hear it today that He said it: *Peace with you! As the Father has sent me, so I also am sending you. As the Son was sent from the Father for the salvation of sinners, so the Son has sent His servants to sinners with His salvation and the peace He has won.*

And on the other hand, when those whom He has set to speak His Word on His behalf *bind* the sins of those who will not surrender and submit to Him in faith, bound they are. When your Pastor proclaims to you, out of the Word of God, that you cannot be a Christian and live and behave in this or that ungodly manner, or that you cannot be a Christian and hold to this or that false teaching, well, then you cannot be a Christian and disregard the Word of Christ spoken by the servant He has sent and set to speak His Word to you. *He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me*, as He had already said it earlier to those whom He had sent with His Word, *and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me.*

And His love is not to be despised, His Word and will not to be taken lightly. As it is also written in the Letter to the Hebrews: *If we wilfully continue to sin after we have received the knowledge of the Truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but rather a fearful expectation of judgement and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.* Yes, for they will not be saved by His Word, who will not submit to His Word, nor will they be saved by His love, who blaspheme against His love and claim His love as an excuse for their ungodly behaviours and beliefs. All that His Word speaks, it speaks out of His love, and so, to reject His Word is to reject His love; well, obviously, to reject His Word and will is to reject Himself, to begin with.

And those who are of the faith will not; they cannot at length turn their backs on His Word and will.

Writes the holy Apostle John: *Whoever has been born of God does not continue in sin, wilfully, that is, as his permanent life choice, for the seed of God remains in him, and he cannot continue in sin because he has been born of God.*

To come to the faith is nothing less than to be born anew, *born of God*. His Word of salvation does nothing less to those hear it. With His Word His own life lives in us, with His Holy Spirit, as *the seed of God*. And His life in us will not leave us alone to live joyfully and undisturbedly in ungodliness and evil, will not allow ungodliness to grow in us and draw us away from the faith and turn us away entirely from our Saviour and His salvation; His living love in us will call us and draw us back into the faith, which is the true obedience, and which will make us again to take His Word of love to heart and allow it to do its work of love in us, so that we will begin, again, to believe in Him, and love Him, and wish not to offend Him with more ungodliness, and repent and seek mercy with Him when we do, as we will.

Such is the power of the Word He has His servants speak; it is indeed *the Word which has the power to save your souls*. Because those whom He sets to speak for Him speaks by His Spirit, who is His own life and breath, which means that in the Word He has His servants speak He speaks Himself, who is the eternal Word of God by whom all things were made, not only with the power by which all things came to be when He commanded them to, but also, and more importantly, in the power of His love. In His Word of His love and what His love has done the greatest love of all shines upon, and into us, and lightens up the darkness of disobedience and defiance and death in us, so that we see, and surrender to His love and acknowledge Him, as did Thomas, to be our Lord and our God. In His Word of salvation the Saviour appears in His glory, which is the glory of His love; He appears, not to our faces, nor to our feelings, but to faith. And thus He *changes stubborn and unwilling people into willing people*, as our Confession says it, *through the drawing of the Holy Spirit*. Such is the power of the Word He has entrusted to His Church, and has her servants speak, and His, and He speaks Himself.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. *Amen.*