

The Man with the Master Keys

In the name of him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, dear friends in Christ: Did you notice all the locked doors in today's Scripture readings? In the reading from Acts, we find some of the disciples locked up in prison, and twice in the Gospel lesson we are told that the disciples had locked themselves in behind closed doors. The interesting thing about all those locked doors is that none of them does what they're supposed to do; namely, keep anyone from going in or out. No, instead it seems that we are told that the doors are locked so that we can appreciate the fact that locked doors do not stop the Lord Jesus from coming and going as he pleases, nor can they stop the disciples from telling others about Jesus. And in the reading from Revelation we can see why: Jesus says he's the one who holds the master keys.

Now, I'm not suggesting that Jesus needs keys to get through locked doors. But I do think that an important truth being revealed to us in these readings is that Jesus can get into what's locked up, and he can get his people out of wherever they are locked up. And the reason this is so important is that today's readings are not so much about locked doors as they are about the locked hearts and minds of men. Take the high priest and his group for example: despite all the miraculous signs and wonders the apostles are doing in the name of Jesus, the high priest and his cronies on the council refuse to hear the message of the disciples. Common sense demands that they open their minds to the possibility that what the disciples are saying must have something to it, otherwise they would not be able to do all the miraculous signs. But it doesn't matter to them. Their hearts are hardened shut with jealousy. Their minds are closed.

In a similar way, you would think that Thomas would be more open to possibilities; after all, he had seen Jesus do many amazing things – even raise the dead. And now here were ten of his closest friends and associates, men he knows to be essentially honest and not given to telling wild tales, all willing to swear on a stack of Bibles that they had seen the resurrected Lord. But it doesn't matter. Despite testimony that would stand up in any court of law – ten eye witness accounts that say exactly the same thing – Thomas refuses to be moved from his unbelief. His mind is locked up tight.

And today each of us know people whose hearts and minds are similarly shut to Jesus. They tell us that they demand hard proof. They want to see signs and wonders. They want to be convinced beyond all doubt and know for sure that Jesus is who we say he is, and did what we say he did, before they will be willing to believe it for themselves. And sometimes it's tempting to ask that they be given the proof they are asking for. We think, "Lord, *why don't* you reveal yourself to people like you did to your disciples and to Thomas? Then they would be convinced of the truth and be believers too. That way they would be saved from their sin." That seems logical to us, doesn't it?

And yet, it should be evident by now that logic is not the problem. The high priest and his associates had plenty of evidence to prove to them that Jesus was who he claimed to be – but they never believed it. Thomas too had ample evidence to believe in the resurrection even before Jesus appeared to him. But he didn't believe either. The entire history of God's people is one of unbelief. Just think of all those people who saw the miraculous signs and wonders God did when he rescued them from Egypt: they saw the plagues, they crossed through the Red Sea, they drank the water from the rock, they ate the bread from heaven, and they even saw God's revealed glory on Mt. Sinai – they heard his voice speaking to them from the cloud; and yet, most of those people did not believe. All the evidence you could ever ask for; but very few believers. Why not? It's because unbelief is not caused by lack of evidence. Instead, unbelief is a form of sin and it is also a product of sin.

Recall that the very first words out of Satan's mouth were "*Did God really say ...?*" And then, "*No, that's not right: you will not surely die...*" His goal was to get our first parents not to believe what God had said, and ever since we fell for it the first time, it has been the nature of man to disbelieve what the Lord has spoken. As

a result, fallen, darkened, spiritually “locked up” human minds cannot accept the truth of Christ’s claims, and no amount of proof will be able to convince them otherwise. With respect to the things of God, the human heart and mind are locked doors – or better yet: sealed tombs.

And today many within the Christian community spend a lot of time and effort attempting to prove Christ’s claims so that doubtful people will be convinced and come to the church and become believers themselves. But it will never work. Sure, for one who is already a believer, such studies have value; but for the unbeliever, they can never help because their hearts and minds are sealed up behind the locked doors of their own sin.

Well, then how *do* we get through what’s locked? The same way Jesus did, of course – and oddly enough, it’s Thomas himself who clues us in as to how this is done. It happened several weeks before his arrest and crucifixion that Jesus told his disciples he was going back to Jerusalem. They thought it was a crazy, illogical thing for him to do. They had just come from Jerusalem, and the reason they left was because Jesus’ enemies were trying to kill him. They thought it would be suicide to go back there now. But Jesus was determined, and when they saw that they couldn’t talk him out of it, it was Thomas who rather fatalistically said, “Well fellas, let’s go too, so that we may die with him.” Though I’m sure he did not know it, what Thomas said was the key.

Earlier in his ministry, Jesus told the Pharisees that the person who is not sick does not need a physician. What he meant was that a person who does not know that he is a sinner does not think he needs a Savior from sin. That’s why tax collectors and prostitutes were receiving and welcoming Jesus and the Pharisees were not. The former knew that they were dead in sin, the latter denied it. And here’s the problem: those who do not know they are dead in sin cannot be brought back to life in Christ. Their hearts and minds are sealed tombs which contain nothing but death – but they do not know it, or they refuse to acknowledge it; because, like Solomon once said, “*The dead don’t know anything.*”

But the ten disciples we find at the beginning of today’s Gospel lesson do know it. They are sealed up tomb-like behind closed doors, cowering there in fear. They know that if they go out they will likely be killed just like their leader was. They know, in this sense, that they’re dead men. And what may not be clear to you is that at this point they also know that Jesus is alive. The other Gospel writers tell us so – but the disciples do not yet understand what his resurrection means. So now, knowing their Lord is alive, they all feel the shame and disgrace of having betrayed, abandoned, and denied him. Though they promised to stick with him and die defending him, they all cut and ran in the face of the enemy. So, their being locked up now is not just for their defense, it’s also a graphic picture of their inner spiritual condition. It’s like they’re in a tomb. They know that they are spiritually dead. And when Jesus first appears to them they’re terrified. They think that he’s going to condemn them for their faithlessness and for having run out on him. But instead, surprisingly, Jesus speaks the pure, life-giving words of forgiveness, “Peace to you”. And these words create new life in what had been dead. The disciples come alive at his word of peace. They’re overjoyed. And then, in what is clearly meant to remind us of the original creation, when God breathed his Spirit into the first man’s lifeless body, Jesus breathes his Spirit into the disciples, giving birth to new creatures – new people whose hearts and minds are free from the locked doors of sin, and who can now truly believe God and his Word.

But Thomas is not with them when all this happens. And rather than hear the good news of the Gospel from his friends, rather than admit that he too is dead in sin, Thomas boasts of his “scientific” approach to things. “I have to have hard evidence, and unless I get it, *I will not believe!*” The truth is that because he refuses to repent, he **cannot** believe. Because he will not spiritually die with Christ by owning and admitting his own guilt, he cannot rise with Christ to new life. Instead, he flaunts his unbelief like a badge of honor – just as do most unbelievers, throwing out his challenge as if to say, “I really can’t believe the rest of you are so stupid as to think that Jesus is alive.” The irony is that Thomas, like all unbelievers, is suffering from the delusion that **he** is alive.

And so, our Lord confronts him and his false view of reality – not so much with proof, because it’s not proof that Thomas really needs, but rather with Law and Gospel. No doubt his initial appearance is terrifying to Thomas, and that Jesus essentially repeats the cocky demand for proof that Thomas laid down must have really stung him. But Jesus immediately relieves his fears: “Peace to you. Here, Thomas, are the wounds you

asked to see. Go ahead. Reach out your hand and touch me.” And sure enough, Thomas doesn’t need to handle the wounds like he’d claimed was necessary. What he needed was to be convicted of his sin and receive the forgiveness of the Lord. He needed to let Christ put the unbelieving sinner to death so that he could raise up a new faithful man in his place. And now in Thomas a new infant in faith is born, one who confesses with the pure and simple faith of a child, “my Lord, and my God”.

It was being forced to recognize his sin and then hearing Christ’s words of forgiveness that changed Thomas and gave him the faith to believe in his risen Savior, and the same is true for us today. We do not see Jesus like Thomas and the disciples did – but then we don’t have to. Our faith does not hang on physical proof that we have seen, or on miracles that we have experienced. Our faith is the result of the new creation that God has worked in us. Jesus gave his disciples the authority to show people that they were locked up in a prison of sin and death, and he gave them the authority to free those who are repentant, giving birth to new believers. We call this authority the “ministry of the keys” for that very reason. This is what creates faith in the risen Savior. This is what unlocks doors, hearts, minds, and yes, even the grave. And so, even without seeing, we are blessed with new life in Christ right now in time – and of course, forever with him in eternity.

And in this new life, you too have been given the same master keys. You can show people how sin has them all locked up, and you can release those who repent – not by attempting to prove Christ’s claims with signs or irrefutable logic; but by proclaiming the simple Gospel of forgiveness in the name of our risen Lord. This is what causes people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, and the Son of God; and by believing, gives them life in his name. This is the master key by which Christ sets people free, and the man with the master keys has placed them in your hands. By his authority and grace, may each of us use them for the good of our neighbors and to the glory of Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!