

Text: Rev. 1:4-18, John 20:19-31, Acts 5:12-20 † Quasimodogeniti (2nd Sun. of Easter)

“I Have the Keys”

In the name of him who has the keys of Death and Hell, dear friends in Christ: Contrary to what you may have heard (or suspected, or perhaps even hoped), I have never actually spent any time in prison. The nearest thing to it that I've experienced was during a three-day escape and evasion problem I went through when I was in the Army. The set up was that our unit was surrounded and trapped behind enemy lines, and that there was no way for us to fight our way out. So instead, we had to break up into two-man teams in order to try to sneak undetected past enemy forces and infiltrate back to the safety of friendly lines. The trick was to do it without getting caught, because if the enemy did catch you, they took you to the POW camp – not a nice place to be. Anyway, while we were behind enemy lines, there were a number of check points we had to go to get necessary passwords and instructions from supposedly friendly civilians who were trying to help us. The truth was that it was near these checkpoints that the soldiers playing the enemy concentrated the majority of their forces so that we'd be easier to catch. And catch us they did—at least most of us. As it happens, my partner and I were among the very few teams that made it back without being captured. The mistake we made was to come in too early. There was still a whole 24 hours left on the three-day exercise. So, they told us that it would be *good* for us to have the experience of being a POW, and they took us to the prison camp anyway. So much for rewarding success. If we had known what was going to happen, we could have laid low for another day, got some much needed sleep, and foregone the pleasure of staying even briefly at Stalag 17.

As much as I hated it, though, and complained about the injustice of it all, I've got to hand it to the guys who were running the POW camp. Even though it was just a training exercise, and you knew that they were really just playing roles as our captors and guards, they made it seem as real as possible. Forget everything you learned watching *Hogan's Heroes*. This was no joke. They had all kinds of ways of dealing with the prisoners like putting us in uncomfortable positions, not letting us sleep, and making us do useless things and then changing the instructions and punishing us for doing them wrong. They played all kinds of mind games with us. And all of it together really did make you feel dehumanized, powerless, and hopeless. And you could sure tell the difference between guys like me who were brought in toward the end of the exercise and people who had been captured within a couple hours of the start. Some of them had been prisoners for two days by the time we arrived – and a few of them were pretty messed up by the experience. They really weren't thinking right. I remember distinctly that one of the dirty tricks they played on us was to tell us that the training exercise was going to end at a certain time and then it would all be over. But when the appointed hour came, nothing happened. They continued to hold us for several more hours without any kind of explanation. And the thing of it was, at that point you didn't know *when* it would end. That really pushed a few people over the edge. I remember too what a relief it was when someone finally produced a key, unlocked the gate, and let us out.

Now, I don't pretend for a moment that this very brief and simulated experience was even close to the real thing; but I can say that it was enough of a taste to convince me that being a prisoner of war is definitely something to avoid. More than that, it helped me to understand what it might be like if it had been real – if the enemy didn't have to treat us with kid gloves and there was no artificial time limit to the confinement.

That would be truly awful. And it's not just the loss of physical freedom. No, what's worse is being forced against your will to obey an enemy; an enemy who controls your behavior with a rigid system of rewards and punishments – with a heavy emphasis on the latter. In order to get by you have to try to please, or at least keep from angering, a demanding and capricious foe who has the power to keep you in fear, who can set you at odds with your fellow prisoners, who can bend your will to his, and who through various brain washing techniques can get you to believe his lies. It's an enemy who ultimately holds over you the power of life and death. I can't imagine that anyone would ever want to be in such a situation.

But, my friends, what I'd have you see this morning is *that is* our situation. On a much grander scale and in a war with far more reaching consequences, while we live out our lives on this fallen earth, we are exactly such prisoners of mankind's greatest and most fearsome foe. I speak of Satan, of course. We are his captives while he conducts his war with God most high. And the thing of it is most people don't even know it. This is the world we were born into, we've never known it any different, and so we think this is the way things are supposed to be. It's not true.

No, we are behind the razor wire; our wills forced to obey the enemy. We actually collaborate with him. And we do it eagerly because we're brainwashed. We honestly believe, for example, that the various sins we commit can make us happy – that good can come from them or that they'll make our lives better. It's never true; but we do believe it. That's why we choose to sin. And we believe the lie that the Lord is a great kill-joy whose holy Word and righteous commands are meant to burden to us. We often think that *He* is the enemy. Or perhaps we go the other way and believe the devilish lie that the Lord can be placated – that our sins against him can be expunged through our good behavior. Then we busy ourselves in doing useless tasks by which we hope to gain the Lord's approval, without realizing the fact that we're actually doing them at the direction of the enemy. And while we are so confined, we are at odds with each other; each one of us suspect of everyone else and trying to figure out how to turn things to our own advantage at the expense of others. And that's kind of funny: the reason we don't trust each other is that we know we ourselves are not trustworthy. I suspect that your motives are sinful and that you're trying to take advantage of me only because I know exactly how a sinner thinks and what I'd be tempted to do if I were in your situation. And over it all in this prison of ours is fear: we fear each other, we fear the future and what it might bring, we fear death, and most of all we fear the judgment that comes after death.

I hope you see this. You *must* see this, because only then can you appreciate and understand in the reading from Revelation what Jesus means when he says, "*Fear not*; 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 Hell." He's telling us that the prison camp in which we are being held has been surrounded and captured by friendly forces – by the Good Guys – and that Jesus himself is unlocking the gate and setting us free.

This is exactly what we see happening in today's Gospel reading. We find the disciples behind locked doors. They are in a self-imposed prison, we are told, for fear of the Jews. And they have good reason to fear them. The leaders of nation conspired against their teacher, Jesus, and they had him crucified. It only makes sense that the next step will be to round up the rest of them. But they have so much more to be afraid of. Though not every one of them is yet fully convinced, at this point they have good reason to believe that Jesus is alive again. They have the report of the women who

went to the tomb and to whom the angels spoke; but they didn't believe it. Much harder to dismiss are the eyewitness accounts of Mary Magdalene and Peter, both of whom have actually seen and spoken with the risen Lord. The trouble is that they don't yet know what it means that Jesus is alive – if indeed he is. What they *do* know is that they all abandoned him. All swore they'd stick with him whatever happened; but poor followers of the Messiah they turned out to be. They all turned tail and ran the moment the going got tough. If Jesus *is* alive, they figure, he has every reason to be very angry. They failed him. They let him down. And he died horribly while they did nothing – just stood in the background and watched helplessly because they were afraid. They know too that one of their own number betrayed Jesus. So, their confidence in themselves and in each other is completely shot.

So here they sit in a prison of fear, doubt, ignorance, mutual suspicion, and guilt. They are exactly where Satan wants to them to be, and where he'd very much like to keep them. But it's right then when all seems hopeless that Jesus shows up with the key. We know from Luke's account of this same episode, when the disciples first saw Jesus, they were terrified. They believed that they were seeing a ghost – which means that they still thought Jesus was dead and that his spirit had returned to haunt and accuse them. And though the first thing Jesus says to them is a comforting word of peace, peace is the last thing they have. But then (and this is vital) Jesus shows them the keys: the very wounds in his hands and in his side – the marks of his death on the cross by which he bore their sins and made their peace with God – *in his now living flesh*. It's upon seeing *these keys* that their hearts are filled with joy. Their fear and doubt vanish. Their guilt is taken away, so that when Jesus speaks again his word of peace, they receive it. They know they've been forgiven, restored, and properly understood, *repatriated*. Through Jesus they are back in the good graces of their heavenly Father. And though there is still much that they don't understand, they are beginning the process of being enlightened. They need to be progressively deprogrammed from their prisoner brainwashing; but they are on the way.

All except for Thomas, that is, who was not present when Jesus appeared. And what we see showcased in him is the prison of unbelief. Think about it: what must it have been like when Thomas returned. All the other disciples have been liberated from their guilt and fear. They are overflowing with joy and they try to share the good news with him. And no doubt he would like nothing better than to join them. But he *can't*. He is unable to receive what they tell him. He *can't* believe it. His mind is locked up tight to the possibility. You know, we often imagine that we are free to believe anything we want to. The truth is that it's not that simple. The Scriptures tell us that the sinful mind is hostile to God and *cannot* believe his Word by its own natural ability. It takes a work of God to open the sin-imprisoned mind.

So, it is that Jesus shows up a week later, again with the key to release Thomas from his prison of doubt and despair. And it's interesting to me that it's the keys – the wounds in Jesus' living flesh – that Thomas demands to touch. And Jesus lets him do it. You want the keys? You want the proof that I was dead and now am alive? You want to be sure that you are forgiven and free? Here. Reach out your hand. Touch the keys. Take them. Open the padlock on your heart and mind. Believe the Good News. Through my death and resurrection, you are free.”

This, not coincidentally, is what our weekly worship is all about. We gather here, like the disciples, in this little haven of security in an otherwise dark and dangerous world.

And with us we bring our failures – the times during the past week that we let Jesus down, that we failed to stand up for his truth and do what was right, that we believed Satan’s lies, and that through our sinful thoughts, words, and actions we betrayed Jesus – or claimed that we didn’t know him. We also bring our fears – our fear of the future, of the failing economy, of the way the world is headed, and of the way our health is failing or that it might one day. We bring our fear of death and God’s righteous judgment. We come here each one in our own little prison of guilt, ignorance, mutual suspicion, doubt, and fear, and Jesus comes and stands here among us in his Word and Sacraments and says “Fear not. I have the key. Take and eat; this is my body given for you. Take and drink; this is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins. Take them. Take *me*. Touch me. Believe me. Receive my peace. I have the keys, and with them I set you free – free from fear, free from doubt, free from God’s judgment, and free from your bondage to sin.” And as Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you are free indeed.”

That is great news for prisoners like us. And there’s more. In this morning’s Gospel lesson, after freeing his disciples from Satan’s POW camp, Jesus breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” Do you understand what he’s saying? It’s nothing less than this: Jesus is saying “I have the keys. And now I’m giving them to you to use in my name and with all my authority.”

This is what gives me the right to stand here before you and say, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you all your sins.” Jesus has the keys. And through the call of the church he hands them to our pastors and says, “Use these for me. Set my people free.” And we do. But it’s not just for pastors. *Everyone* who has the gift of God’s Holy Spirit – which you can be certain you do if you believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ – also has the keys.

“But what do I do with them?” you may ask. Easy. Don’t put them in your pocket, that’s for sure. No. Keep them in your hand so that you’ll be ready to use them. Tell yourself, “I have the keys”, and use them for yourself whenever Satan tries to deceive you into thinking that your sins are too many or too great for God to forgive. Use them when the devil tries to bring you into fear of death and judgment. Use them also to counter temptation – to free your mind to trust in the truth, to be free to love others and put them first, and to be truly kind and patient and gentle with them. And use them to free others – to declare God’s forgiveness and peace to those who are burdened by guilt and doubt. Use them to open the minds of those who stubbornly resist God’s truth, as Thomas did, by your faithful witness to Christ and by your sharing of his Word. You’ve been given the keys to Death and Hell. Use them so that you and others may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that by believing you may have everlasting life *and freedom* in his name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!