

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear...” That sentence certainly describes our life right now. As I preach, the doors of the church are locked as everyone who needs to be here to produce this video are already in the building. For those of you listening, if your doors aren’t literally locked, you certainly have limited those who can visit you.

Coronavirus has put on hold much of the community we’ve been enjoying. It has locked doors and shut opportunities that we would have had in a normal setting.

Yet Jesus goes through locked doors. **“...Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.”** What amazing Easter joy we have as Christians. Jesus comes to us in our isolation to bring us peace and hope!

And we believe in a God who is all about unlocking doors and opening new opportunities. **THE LORD SENDS MESSENGERS TO UNLOCK THE DOOR TO HEAVEN.** Jesus tells the disciples very important and profound words as He enters their room that evening: **“Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.””**

I. The Lord sent Jesus to unlock the door to heaven. “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” Our Heavenly Father sent Jesus on a mission: to open the kingdom of heaven to all believers. Jesus said to the disciples, **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”** Jesus came to warn those who rejected him that the door was locked, and to unlock doors for those who believed in him.

This presupposes that the door is locked, which not everyone today agrees is the case. When they picture themselves at the pearly gates before Peter, they can think of a whole host of reasons they should be let in: I’m a delightful person, I did a whole bunch of nice things, or I had a tough life so give me a break.

Many people in Jesus’ day didn’t believe that Jesus unlocked doors. They thought that they could open the door to heaven by following the law. They saw no need for Jesus and in fact rejected Him. We see this all throughout the Bible.

The first step to receiving forgiveness is to realize that you need it. Some reject Jesus’ offer of forgiveness. With that rejection comes the rejection of the key that will unlock the door. With that rejection, Jesus has to state the facts, that forgiveness is withheld, the gate to heaven is shut, and the only alternative is eternal punishment. This is the binding key, or the key that locks.

But Jesus did wonderful work unlocking the door and offering forgiveness freely. He was the friend of tax collectors and sinners because those individuals knew that they needed help. They pounded on the door many times and fell flat. Jesus came for sinners like you. Sinners like me.

He unlocks doors. He unlocked doors as he took your sins to Calvary. He unlocked doors as He burst from the tomb on the third day, and in this season in particular we celebrate His resurrection. His resurrection is the proof that in Him, the door to heaven is unlocked for you. Your sins are forgiven. This is the loosing key, or the key that unlocks. **“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** The Father sent Jesus for the purpose of freeing sinners, forgiving sins, and calling people out of death to life.

II. Through the Church, The Lord sends pastors to unlock the door to heaven. The Church works together to call leaders to serve in their midst. Every spring in the end of April, the seminaries of our church body hold Call Day services. Around 100 men receive assignments to serve in Lutheran churches across the United States. This is an event that is fresh in my mind as it was only a couple years ago in my case that my call here was announced on that night. That night was the pinnacle of my seminary career.

The Lord works through congregations to call pastors to unlock and to lock doors. In a sense, pastors are doormen. Maybe that puts a new meaning on the Bible passage, **“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”**

This passage in John is what we as Christians call the office of the keys. It is the responsibility the Church on earth has to forgive the sins of Christians who are sorry for their sins, and to withhold forgiveness from those who are not sorry for their sins.

The congregation entrusts the pastor to work alongside them to act as a spokesperson or ambassador who speaks on behalf of Christ. **“...if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”** Sometimes that involves the message of explaining the door is locked.

This happens every time I preach the Word of the Law. God’s Word of Law explains that apart from Christ, we are in sin. Apart from the free gift of God in Christ, there is no forgiveness, there is no life, and the door to heaven is locked. Sometimes that is in a general sense when I preach from the pulpit. Other times it can be specific: in small group or one-on-one scenarios when I plead with someone to turn from sin. I warn them that if a habit, behavior, or sin is left unchecked and unrepented of, it can lead to the door to heaven remaining locked.

It’s the toughest part of any pastor’s job, but it is always for the goal of unlocking the door. Sometimes doctors cut into patients to take out a worse malady such as cancer or an infection. We call that surgery. Sometimes engineers need to

put their job on the line standing before the mayor saying, “If you don’t do something about this bridge, it will collapse and kill hundreds of people.” The Church works with pastors to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent, wishing and hoping that the sinner turns from their sins to receive forgiveness and to let the door to eternal life be opened before them.

That brings us to the other aspect of Jesus’ words today. **“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them...”** The normal work of the church is to forgive the sins of those who are sorry! This is the unlocking key or the loosing key. What a difference forgiveness can make! It certainly changed the disciples who were filled with guilt over abandoning their savior. Yet what does Jesus say to them? **“Peace be with you!”** That declaration of peace transformed them to even give their lives for their Savior.

And so the Lord has called pastors through the church to call people to faith in Jesus as their risen savior. In this faith is the forgiveness of sins. Thus, I proclaim to you the forgiveness of your sins as though those words were coming from the mouth of Jesus Himself. I baptize people, and through that gift of God, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation is applied. I administer the Lord’s Supper through which we receive Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. I counsel people, specifically applying Jesus’ word of forgiveness and healing to those who have hurts that have ached underneath for years. All these things I do, and it is a joy to do this, to serve Jesus by announcing that in Him your sins are forgiven, you are holy and blameless, and that in Him, the door to heaven is unlocked. **“I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”** I serve simply as a doorkeeper.

III. Through the Holy Spirit, the Lord sends you to unlock the door to heaven. **“As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”** And so you too, dear Christian friend, have the privilege of sharing this good message with others in your life. This happens when you forgive others for wrongs committed against you. This happens when you console someone who feels guilty and assures them of the new start and the open door to heaven that they have in Jesus Christ.

Sometimes it can be hard. Sometimes it involves warning others that certain behaviors are spiritually unhealthy, and I don’t think that’s an easy conversation for anyone to have. But how glorious it is when God uses us to share His Word of Law, so that the Word of Gospel can shine all the more brightly. How beautiful it is when the door finally opens after you realize you can’t open it yourself.

On this Second Sunday of Easter, let us reflect on how much of a blessing it is to have God our Heavenly Father who sends us messengers to warn us, but also to forgive us. He sends us Christian friends and family, He sends us pastors, and above all else, He has sent us our Risen Savior, who died for our sin that the door to heaven might be open to us eternally. Amen!