



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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SERMON – 2<sup>ND</sup> EASTER

JOHN 20:19-31

APRIL 24, 2022

“LOCKS AND KEYS”

Our story from John today presents to us what has sometimes been called “the keys to the kingdom” – the ability of the church to either forgive or retain sins. It is of no small significance that our Lord offers these keys to followers who to this point were gathering behind locked doors. We of course lock what we don't want to lose. That includes our personal safety – hence our houses feature locks and alarms, but even inanimate “things” from bank accounts to phones we put some sort of lock on – it's “our stuff” and no one else has a right to it.

But I suggest fear is also a determining factor in what we choose to lock. And in this regard, I'm thinking more of our sense of self. Many people, maybe all of us, “lock down” our emotions for fear of exposing some vulnerability or disagreeable characteristic. I freely admit I “guard” my feelings – zealously, and I unlock the inner me cautiously.

In our lesson “fear” is mentioned twice, explicitly once and implied once. John says, *“the disciples were together, with the doors locked, for fear of the Jews.”* The disciples were vulnerable men and women, you may even say “helpless” at this point. The Jews might just as well have wanted to finish off the diabolical Jesus movement swiftly. And yet, if Jesus was alive, that meant he was who he had claimed to be – the Son of God. And in one way or another all his followers had betrayed him.

Think of it like this - are any of us ready to stand in the presence of God in our present sinful state? In our lesson from Revelation, it says John, at the sight of Jesus and his glory, *“fell at his feet as though dead.”* Enough said. Yet in Romans 5:6-8, the Apostle Paul sums up the Christian message in words we should all take to heart, as they describe so completely what the death of Jesus means to every human being; *“At just the right time, while we were still helpless, Christ died for the ungodly...God demonstrates his own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*

That is Christianity friends - the end of our helplessness, the end of our condemnation, the genesis of our salvation. There are elements of the “me inside” that I would like to keep under lock and key. You have them too. We all harbor thoughts that are “indefensible” and if exposed would bring us shame. We are what Paul in Romans 5 said we are – helpless. If you don't know that, then you have yet to know grace - by which God makes of sinners, men and women now blameless in his sight - reborn by water, word, and the Holy Spirit.

As to this grace, and we must approach this with care – it is extended in our story with nary a word of repentance on the part of Jesus' disciples. This is not the first time this has happened with Jesus – in John 8 a woman accused of adultery is sent away without condemnation having made no confession. A paralytic early in Jesus ministry was forgiven likewise, and Jesus famous command to forgive our brother “70 times 7” makes no mention of that brother's repentance.

I know it is difficult to square Jesus' words in our lesson today about forgiving sins on the one hand, and retaining them on the other, without regard to the role of genuine repentance. But peace, the peace Jesus gives, and we can extend to one another, does not hinge on repentance. Anyone who is in a close friendship or a marriage can tell you that reconciliation can occur even if neither side admits to a wrong. And people can forgive others without affecting or changing who that person is.

It is a high and hard calling, but that is the sort of forgiveness victims of a terrible act by another can offer in order to free their own souls. Theologian Lewis Smedes says, *"when we forgive like this, we set a prisoner free, and then discover that the prisoner we set free was us."*

Catholic priest and writer Richard Rohr, in his book *"Falling Upwards"* said *"one must understand that Jesus Christ was never upset with sinners. He was upset with people who did not think they were sinners. Jesus was fully at home with the tragic sense of our life."* Father Rohr suggests that those who have fallen, failed or "gone down" are the only ones who understand "up." For if a thief on the cross was thought worthy of paradise, why should a Christian not be thought worthy of forgiveness?

Jesus is not afraid to "unlock" those places we prefer or fear we must keep locked down. In Matthew 12, Jesus warns those who might wish to "sweep their souls clean" by their own self-righteousness that such places, if left unoccupied, meaning no Jesus in them, are only playgrounds of the devil – they have no need of a forgiver and so, will never know peace either.

The death of Jesus on the cross accomplished something truly remarkable - it forged peace between God and sinners – it forged our salvation. It was a demonstration of God's love, as Paul in Romans 5:6-8 says. But it was also a demonstration for us, as in John 13, where Jesus said; *"By this all people shall know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* Not only did Jesus forgiving love save us, his forgiving love is meant to be the defining feature of our faith, our discipleship, our clearest and most effective witnessing tool, the clearest evidence that we are "his disciples."

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The second is like it "love your neighbor as yourself." Add as Jesus commands, your enemies, the stranger, the imprisoned, and I'm not sure there are many people in this world forgiveness leaves out. Jesus said, *"if you love only those who love you, what reward will you get."* What God will do to the "high handed", unrepentant sinner God will do. What you do, what this congregation does, with the keys of the kingdom, grace and forgiveness, is what God in Christ did with them to you. *"By this everyone will know ..."* AMEN