**Forgiveness Applied**

Based on [John 20:19-31](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn20.19-31)

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The Second Sunday of Easter ~

Quasimodo Geniti

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Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, just as he said he would. And the very evening of his resurrection, he returns to his disciples saying “Peace be with you” and showing them his holy hands and pierced side. But there is no time for idleness. Jesus isn’t just stopping by for a social visit. He comes to his disciples that same night in order to send them to forgive sins on his behalf.

There is so much going on in our gospel lesson today, it is as an embarrassment of riches for a preacher. But sometimes less is more, and so I want you to consider today only this: the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won on the cross…he distributes that forgiveness through the church.

Days earlier Jesus had died a gruesome, painful and horrific death on the cross. And the physical torture was gruesome, but is only a pale reflection of the more excruciating pain he endured. He he suffered the spiritual pangs of hell in our place as the wrath of God was poured out on him. **This crucifixion and death was not simply for show, it was a sacrifice, a payment of life for life.** We deserve to suffer hell, and justice requires that everyone get what he deserves. By his suffering and death he purchased and won the forgiveness of sins for all people.

He paid for and acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people. In his pierced hands he holds the keys to death and Hades, and holds the ransom money to release us from bondage. He ***paid for*** the forgiveness of all people…but not all people will be forgiven. How can this be?

There is a difference between having the right to forgive people and actually forgiving them. When you win the lottery you have the right to the prize, but it is not yours until you claim it. On the cross, Jesus won the right to forgive all people. However, that forgiveness must be personally applied to faith, and receive by faith. How is Jesus going to distribute the forgiveness of sins if he’s going to ascend to the Father in Forty days?

As I said, he doesn’t waste any time. Jesus is raised from the dead and immediately gets to work setting his house in order. He ensures the forgiveness of sins he paid so dearly for will not be horded or wasted. He wishes to spend it on the world. So he sends his disciples to do such that. He sends them and says, “**If you forgive anyone his sins they are forgiven, if you withhold forgiveness it is withheld.”**

This is such a crucial distinction that many people--who don’t have the patience for it--fall into error by neglecting it. On the one hand you have the Roman church that teaches that the forgiveness and remission of sins was won not only by Christ, but also the holy men and saints of the church! And on account of their merit, which adds to the merit of Christ, the church has a treasure house of grace that it can spend to forgive the punishments that Christ didn’t cover. In this way they still teach that the cross wasn’t sufficient for all grace. That Jesus suffering didn’t will all forgiveness…..But here Jesus shows his disciples that the wounds he bears are sufficient for their peace and forgiveness. Jesus won all forgiveness on the cross.

At the other extreme, you have churches who teach that the forgiveness of sins that Jesus won is there’s immediately. They suppose that they don’t need anyone, any minister or other Christian to distribute it to them. Nevertheless, Jesus sends his apostles out to forgive sins. Why would he do that? Because the forgiveness he purchased by his blood, must be administered to his people.

Friends, today we see Jesus establish his church on earth. And his church is in the business of forgiving sins with his blood money, as it were. ***The church is not simply an organization set up to tell people about Jesus.*** Jesus won forgiveness on the cross; he gave his church the duty to distribute that forgiveness to believers, and to withhold it from the wicked, until the end of the age…until he returns in glory.

Jesus could have breathed on his disciples and said, “If you tell of my forgiveness to anyone and they believe, they are forgiven, if you tell of my forgiveness and they do not believe, forgiveness is withheld.” But he uses personal second person language to his apostles upon whom he built his church. “If ***you*** forgive them”…”If ***you*** withhold forgiveness…it is withheld”. Jesus intended his church to act in his stead and by his command, forgiving others as if he was there forgiving them himself. And that’s because he is.

The small catechism says, “**I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.**”

Someone might say, Jesus would never do that. Jesus would never be so negligent as to entrust the forgiveness of sins to a fallible church filled with sinful people.” Yes, the church is made up of fallible sinful men who hold the title of pastors. So were the apostles and prophets before them. **Yes, in its assembly that may contain hypocrites who worship alongside true believers…so was Judas among the twelve.** But the church is not sinful, it is holy. It is filled with sinful men but is not fallible in Christ. It is blessed and sent by Christ into the world and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. And the church is his bride, whom he loves and gave himself for. And he gave to her the ministry of reconciliation, through which he works to make her presentable to his father in heaven, blameless as he was hanging on the cross for her, pure as his precious blood shed for her, holy as He is holy to the Lord.

Jesus has since ascended to the Father, but he is still on earth—invisible, yet in the flesh--forgiving sins. When the minister baptizes, it is Christ’s hand that applies the water. When the minister proclaims “**This is my Body and blood for you**” it is Christ who speaks through the minister. And when the called and ordained minister says “**in the stead and by the command of Christ, I forgive you all your sins**” it is not his forgiveness, but Christ whose is present in the ministry, forgiving the sins of his people because he owns it. It is his to give, receive it by faith today and every day it is offered. Christ has won the lottery for you…be sure to come claim your prize.