

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 20:19-31

Christ Sends Christians to Be His Mouth

Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Christ sends the disciples as He had been sent. Christ's redemptive mission is over. Now the Church's evangelizing work begins. Christ's grave was opened. Now Christ opens the frightened disciples' mouths to be His own. Christ was sent to do the Father's work. Now the Church is sent to declare Christ's redemptive work to all the world.

The Church's work is ultimately comprised of forgiving and retaining sins. This work is given to the Church as a whole, but especially to those ministers whom She calls to work publicly in Christ's name. When a sinner repents of his sins, seeing his lost condition and confessing his need for a Savior, Christ Himself declares forgiveness to him through the Church. Christ sends the sin away through the mouth of His called servant. What a joy to be the lips that declare that release from slavery to sin! However, when a sinner refuses to acknowledge his sins, fools himself into thinking he can save himself, or refuses to leave a willfully sinful life, the Church retains those sins. They hang around the sinner's neck, as a sign of his approaching damnation. What a solemn responsibility to declare such bondage in sin!

Luther wrote on this: *"It is a great and excellent thing for the mouth of every honest minister and preacher to be Christ's mouth, and his word and forgiveness to be Christ's word and forgiveness."* While Christ has given His called servants a demanding and sizeable responsibility that brings with it much sadness and frustration, He has also given them a fount of great joy. In His infinite compassion, for every inch of their forehead (Ezekiel 3:9), God gives His called servants occasions to remember with rejoicing what Christ has graciously worked through their humble ministry by the retaining and forgiving of sins when, with their own sinful mouths, they are privileged as Christ's servants to announce Christ's blood-bought forgiveness, the only thing that can soothe an inflamed conscience, to those who have come to see their sin and sorrowed over it. That's what gets a pastor out of bed in the morning. That and perhaps their son jumping on them. Mostly the former, though.

Last Sunday we saw Jesus demonstrate His special love for Peter when He made sure that His angel told the women to go and tell the disciples and Peter that He had risen. Now, our Lord demonstrates His patient love for Thomas as well. Thomas had doubted Christ's promises, he'd doubted the Old Testament Scriptures he'd learned from childhood, he'd doubted the evidence of the empty tomb, the frightened soldiers, and the testimony of the women and the other disciples, and yet Christ now lovingly restores Thomas and sends Him out to proclaim what he here again receives: forgiveness. Luther writes about this incident: *"[Jesus] does not desire to overturn or reject the weak in faith, but bears patiently with their weakness, not snarling at them frightfully, but handling them gently and respectfully. He demonstrates this here with Thomas."*

Jesus patiently dealt with Thomas' doubts. He did what Thomas previously foolishly demanded. He showed Him His hands, feet, and side; the wounds from which life and forgiveness flow. And what did Jesus' patient care produce? Thomas makes perhaps the most succinct and clearest confession of faith in the person and divinity of Christ that we find in the New Testament, *"My Lord and my God!"* Such is the aim and desire of the Church's patient work as well.

And we've brought our own doubts as we gather with the other disciples today, perhaps not regarding Christ's resurrection, but doubts concerning His promises and the Scriptures nonetheless. We've all had different reasons for doubting—perhaps the bills are tight, our friends are fake, our body is frail, or our family is falling apart—but regardless, we all need the same thing: to have our sin pointed out and to be patiently assured that Christ loves and forgives us. And Jesus still points us to Himself, to the place we see Him most clearly. John writes, "*These [words] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" And, to heap grace upon grace, in the Sacrament, He gives us His very Blood that flowed from those wounds His very Body that bore them, into which He bid Thomas to place His hands.

What Christ has done for us, we now also do for others. We patiently point out sin so that we may then declare forgiveness when that sin is acknowledged. We realize that even the best Christians may have doubts at times—Peter and Thomas did—and, for that reason, we continually work as Christ's mouth, patiently declaring His words of mercy and grace until they finally sink in. And, when we are the ones doubting, we look for forgiveness and strength from the same place Thomas found it: Christ's mouth. We confess that which threatens us to our pastor and cling to Christ's absolution.

When we see the Church for what it is, the mouth of Christ, then we will truly appreciate it and flock to it; then we will live as one in it. When we see our called servants for what they are, then we will encourage, support, and thank them; then we will focus more on the words our Savior speaks through their mouths and less on their personal quirks or ways of doing things, so long as those quirks and ways are not contrary to their calling. Christ's mouth is a source of *peace*, of unity, of mutual consolation, not of division and discord. See the grace that proceeds from it. Be the mouth that grace proceeds from, building up others in the faith with the Word.

My grandfather was Lutheran. He never once pressured me to become Lutheran; in fact, I began classes for completely unrelated reasons. Yet it was an answer to his prayers that I was becoming Lutheran. He died a few days before I was confirmed. As he died, I held his hand and prayed the Lord's Prayer with him. He smiled and prayed with me, although he hadn't really talked for days before that. That was the first of many deathbeds God has blessed me to sit beside. When he was buried in a Lutheran cemetery, I looked around his grave at lots of names, lots of crosses. I thought, "Who brought that person to the font? Who shared the Gospel with that person? Who called that person back when they strayed? Who placed Christ's Body and Blood, together with His peace, into that person's mercy-hungry mouth? Who absolved that troubled conscience? Who told that person, '*Peace be with you,*' as they left this world as a saint in Christ?" I often remembered that day as I prepared to be a candidate for the ministry. I've always found in it greater appreciation for all those, lay and ordained, who through their various vocations and roles in life have been gifted with the privilege of announcing the forgiveness of sins to their children, to their friends, to their brothers and sisters, and to their flock. I still think the same thing every time I walk through a cemetery. I'd encourage you to do the same. What is important in life is really put in perspective by a headstone.

May all of you experience the joy of hearing words from Christ's mouth frequently and in faith, for, while no words bring more terror than "Your sins are retained," no words ring more beautifully in a Christian's ears than, "Your sins are forgiven." May all of you experience the joy of being Christ's mouth in your personal lives with one another. May we all treasure the ministry of the Church so that we support the training of men for such work and faithfully pray for those men who already have been entrusted with this sacred task. Still today, Christ sends Christians to be His mouth. Still today, Christ sends forgiven Christians to announce His forgiveness. Thanks be to God. Amen.