



Doubting Thomas by Caravaggio
Italian, 16th century

EASTER 2 A
1 May AD 2011
Text : John 20:19-23

Today's Gospel is the account of Doubting Thomas. The story is memorable to all precisely because this 'doubting saint' has the guts to verbalize what we have all thought: "how do I know Jesus *is risen* from the dead? I didn't see it: Jesus didn't appear to me: I wasn't there. Shall I believe another's word?" Yes, 'Thomas' you should. And, that's the point. John is saying, "since all you Thomases can't be here, *we are*. Jesus has appointed us the eye-witnesses to the *we have written our testimony so that future generations may believe and live*. resurrection, and (John 20:31)

But there's a bit more. Thomas' doubts distract us from something very important. Thomas' doubts cast a shadow over the reason for the good news. His personal issue has caused me to neglect the "*bestowal of the Keys*." This event is something like a formal *investiture*; no robes of office are involved at this time, but Jesus bestows upon the apostles as a group, and Peter as their leader, the Holy Spirit, and with it, "**the Office of the Keys.**"

Seldom called by its formal title, the Office of the Keys *is the power given to the Church on earth** and exercised by its clergy *to forgive the sins of the penitent*, and when necessary to withhold grace and forgiveness from those who refuse to repent. (This power to "bind and loose", as it is sometimes called, is also recorded in Matthew 18.)

The Bible speaks best for itself

This *investiture* is rooted deep in Israel's past, beginning with Joseph. In Genesis 41 (v. 42) Pharaoh makes Joseph his main man, his chief steward. Anyone wanting to do business with Pharaoh goes through Joseph. The son of Jacob Israel has literally been given the keys to Egypt and especially its storehouses, where he has stored up record-breaking quantities of grain. Joseph has been *invested* (robe and ring) with the power and authority to release this grain and feed the people—or not! Everyone comes to him for food; in time he will control the people's money, all their livestock, and their land. Joseph gets the credit for building Pharaoh's kingdom and power.

*The authority to forgive sin or withhold grace is given by Christ to the Church on earth. It is a stewardship which she exercises in the building of Christ's Kingdom. In heaven that power is retained by Christ, see Revelation 1:18 and 3: 7. But what the Church binds or releases, it remains so for eternity. This is the awesome authority Christ has given his Kingdom.

In Isaiah 22:20 ff, Eliakim succeeds Shebna as *chief steward* of Hezekiah's palace. It was not an easy time but he served honorably. Eliakim in becoming Hezekiah's "chief of staff" was clothed (*in-vested*) with the king's robe and sash, and speaks with his authority. *On his shoulder is placed "the key to the house of David," with "the power to open and shut."*

In the 21st century *the Office of the Keys* sounds a bit archaic, and if it is not explained in a footnote, most of us read right passed it. But to the apostles this is a great and solemn moment. (See also; Mt. 16:17-19 and 18:18; Jn. 20:21-23 and other related passages.) If we understood what the LORD Jesus was doing, we would shrink at the awesomeness of our responsibility. If people understood what our risen King was doing, they'd be at service. To the holy apostles *first*, and as a result to the universal Church, and through it to you and me, Jesus entrusts the power of the Keys. The whole Church exercises this office *informally* through your witness as "*the priesthood of believers;*" and *formally* in the preaching of the Law and the Gospel, and *sacra-mentally* through Confession and Absolution, Baptism and the Holy Supper.

Exercising the Keys

Every so often someone will ask me, *not* about the bizarre language surrounding the bread and wine we receive from the altar, but about my authority to Absolve. The answer is in the Words, "*by virtue of my office...*" The Holy Spirit, at work in this congregation has *Called me*, entrusted and invested its pastor with authority to forgive sins, preach the Gospel, administer its Sacraments. I am a steward, "called and ordained," "a servant of the Word..." St. Paul writes, "This is how one should regard us, as *servants of Christ* and *stewards of the mysteries of God.*" (1 Cor. 4:1)

With regard to Confession, my study is Las Vegas, what is said behind that door, must stay behind that door. What you say to your pastor/ confessor, is sacred conversation, acknowledged by law. *THE SMALL CATECHISM* assures us that the absolution (the formal announcement of grace and forgiveness) is "as certain as if Christ spoke with us himself." (p. 224, 2005 edition)

There are benefits to (private) confession.

1. We easily deceive ourselves; at one time we've all thought that we can't be truly forgiven: that either our sin is too great, or God's mercy not great enough.
2. On the other side we can reason that our sin was not all that bad, especially when compared with someone else.
3. Human nature tends toward pride and "self-congratulation" when it thinks it has overcome a bad habit or a pet sin.

4. People convince themselves that some of their behaviors are not sin at all.
5. Confession helps us take an honest and objective look at ourselves.

The resulting benefits are not merely spiritual peace. There is a real relief and catharsis when the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection are appropriated by you, believed and lived. There is true joy in knowing that you've come clean; that you've emptied your personal rubbish bin, that you've unloaded your baggage. The wounds in Jesus' hands and side are the sign for you—they are the memorials that God on high has come down from heaven and taken on all our human 'stuff,' our problems, burdens, woes, pains, sorrows, troubles *and sin*. As St. Paul says of our Lord, “[God] made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21)

In confronting the Savior as he does, Thomas confesses his doubt and maybe even his jealousy. In offering him the testimonies of Cross, Jesus absolves him—takes away the source of his sorrow, trouble and anger.

You and I find to find the same absolution and peace in Jesus, crucified and risen. His Word assures you that it is for you he came—it is your life that he redeemed. It is you that he wants to admit into the royal court of heaven.

You want in? Believe in Christ, believe the apostolic Word. (Jn. 17:20 et al)

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