

*19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."*

*26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

Even as I was saying the words they surprised me. I had looked at the words I was supposed to say a couple of times that day but I never really thought about them until the moment I laid my hands on the head of the first one who came forward and spoke the words that are written on page 259 of the red hymnal – In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins. I forgive you all your sins?

Now I am used to saying it this way – Therefore by the authority of Christ I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins. When said in this way I am declaring but Jesus is forgiving. But on Maundy Thursday I said to those who came forward, I forgive you all your sins.

Now it is not that I do not want to forgive people – but as I said it I wondered who am I that it would matter that I would say, "I forgive you all your sins." You may have noticed that I normally skip the line that is written in the book – the part that says, "As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ." Most every week I skip that line because I think it makes it sound like I can announce forgiveness because I have been ordained. As if when I became a clergy person I got some special power. I am certain that ordination gave me no special powers. But when you called me to be pastor here you were asking me to preside at the Lord's Supper on behalf of the whole

congregation and to announce forgiveness on behalf of the whole congregation. The authority for the meal and for forgiving belongs to you – the church of Jesus Christ. Luther wrote: “We are all priests, as many of us as are Christians. But the priests, as we call them are ministers chosen from among us, to do all that they do in our name.”

For the sake of order you have placed that authority in my hands for the time I serve as your pastor. Someday when I am no longer your pastor you will call someone else to exercise that authority on your behalf. When I am no longer under call to this congregation I will have no more authority here than any baptized person. I thought about your call to me to be your pastor as I spoke the words, “In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins.” I was speaking this word not because of who I was but because of your call.

On Easter Evening when Jesus appeared to ten of the disciples he breathed the Holy Spirit into them and said, “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained.” He said, “If you forgive ... you.

Martin Luther wrote that God alone can forgive sin, and in God’s name “every Christian, even a woman or a child, may declare forgiveness of sins to a repentant brother.” For Luther the authority given to the ten disciples that day is given to every baptized Christian.

Given to you. It is not my ordination but my baptism that gives me authority to forgive sins. You have that authority also.

When Jesus spoke these words to the disciples that night he could have given them a list of conditions for forgiving. He could have told them that they could forgive if the person was truly sorry or if the person promises to do better. But Jesus simply said, “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained.”

It is like Jesus has turned over all the authority of God to you – not just to the people at the top of the pyramid – the leaders - but on that evening to fishermen and tax collectors – people who had not been particularly faithful when Jesus was being arrested and tried. Jesus turned over authority to James and John who not so long before had

been lobbying Jesus for a place at his right and left hand. That angered the other disciples. Jesus taught them all that authority in the church would not mean “lording” it over others but serving.

“If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven.”

Jesus is entrusting the greatest responsibility of all to you – the authority to forgive sins. Jesus will stand behind you on this. When you forgive God forgives.

The very next thing we read in our gospel is that Thomas who was not present did not believe the ten when they told him of seeing Jesus. Yet they did not kick him out – even though he did not believe their word he was still welcome to be with them. As they welcomed him they were living forgiveness for him. Because they did Thomas was there when Jesus came one week later and then Thomas believed.

Forgiveness was at the very center of the story of Jesus then. Through you forgiveness can be at the very center of the story of Jesus now.

“If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven.” Amen.