

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Opening the Doors of Life**

Matthew 16:13-20

Even when there's not a lot of interest in the church, there's still a lot of interest in Jesus. Folks still think about him, look into him, and consider his teachings and claims, even if they aren't part of the community of his followers. At the beginning of today's Scripture passage, Jesus does some quick polling and asks his disciples about the opinions of people outside his circle of followers. What's the word on the street? What are people's impressions of him? Who do they think he is? Based on the disciples' answers, it sounds like most people have a pretty high regard for Jesus. They see him as another prominent messenger in a long line of prophetic figures who have shaped Israel's identity and mission. Individuals like John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. So Jesus is in pretty good company.

But according to Matthew, while saying that Jesus is prophetic is accurate, it's not adequate. There's much more to who he is and what he's doing. As the conversation goes on, we learn that Jesus isn't just interested in what the general public thinks of him. He's most of all interested in what his own disciples think of him. "But as for you, who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus (v. 15). The question is addressed to the whole group. And Peter, as the central figure among the disciples, speaks for them, and really for all of us who profess faith in Jesus. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16).

That's not something that Peter, or any of us, could figure out on our own. As Jesus says, the only way for you to grasp his identity is for the heavenly Father to open the eyes of your heart and mind and show you. And once you see, there's more to being a disciple than just giving the right answer to Jesus' "Who am I?" question. That's because embedded in this question are other questions, like: Why are you following me? Why are you here? Why have you chosen to go down this path of discipleship? Do you realize that when you answer the question about who I am, you're also answering the question about who you are?

That's how it works in today's text. As soon as Simon confesses who Jesus is, Jesus turns right around and tells him who he is, giving him a new name and a new task. "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (vv. 18-19). These verses have a long history of diverse interpretation, particularly when it comes to differences between the Roman Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Christian faith. As a congregation of believers who are in the evangelical stream of the Protestant tradition, we focus more on how Christ has entrusted the authority and work of his church, and the mission of the kingdom, to all of us in the community of his disciples. In this respect, we're all key holders to the church of the risen Lord.

Every congregation knows plenty about the subject of keys. Who has a key to the front door of the church, and who doesn't? How can I get access to a particular church closet where materials are stored? My key fob has stopped working, so who do I see about getting a replacement? One of the most vital, and sometimes confusing, spots in our church, is the key box. Earlier this week, during a lesson on today's Scripture passage, I was showing our day care children some of the keys on my ring, I reached a point where,

like many of you, I said, "You know, I'm not really sure what that key goes to. I don't know what it locks or unlocks, what it closes or opens.

About a year ago, a 103-year-old woman named Genora Hamm Biggs walked back into her church in the town of Elberton, Georgia. She had previously been banned from the congregation because of a dispute with the pastor and some other church leaders over the pastor's preaching style. Though Biggs had joined the church at age 11, the intensity of the disagreement eventually led the church to send her a letter revoking her membership. On a few occasions, she violated the ban and showed up at church anyway. The first time she did, some members stopped the service, turned out the lights, and left her inside. Other times the police had to be called, though no one was ever arrested. As for the pastor, Rev. Tim Maddox, who described Ms. Biggs as combative and disruptive, he eventually announced that he was resigning and starting a church in another part of town. Following his announcement, there was one more matter to take of—returning Ms. Biggs' church keys, which the pastor handed over to the Biggs family attorney. One of the major moments in the news report is footage of Ms. Biggs, leaning on her walker, making her way slowly up the ramp to the church door, where someone inserts her key into the lock, and she turns the key, opens the door, and steps back into the life of the congregation. Ironically, the door was right next to the pastor's parking space.

Having the keys to the church is no minor matter. It shows that you have access, and in some cases a significant level of authority. Authority is part of what comes with the keys that Jesus mentions in today's Scripture passage. He tells Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19). This image of Peter with the keys has sparked endless stories, jokes, and cartoons portraying him as the doorkeeper of heaven. How many times have you heard or told a story that begins with something along the lines of, "Three people arrive at the pearly gates, and Saint Peter says, . . ." One of my favorites is a drawing of an angelic Peter, standing outside the golden gates, calling in on the security phone, saying, "Yeah, Saint Peter here. I locked myself out again."

Perhaps that image is a reminder that no matter what particular interpretation you give to the role of Peter in the life of Christ's church, the community of God's people is still just that, Christ's church, not yours or mine or any other particular individual's. In our text, Jesus is very clear: "On this rock I will build *my* church." So none of us are the gatekeepers of God's kingdom, determining who gets in and who doesn't. Our job is simply to do as Peter did, namely, to confess, in word and deed, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and thereby to help others enter the realm of life, not death, the glory of heaven, not the destruction of hell. In the end, only the one who is Lord of the church gets to decide who ends up where. It reminds me of something that John Newton, the converted slave-dealer, who authored the beloved hymn, "Amazing Grace," once wrote. He said, "If I ever reach heaven, I expect to find three wonders there: First, to meet some I had not thought to see there; second, to miss some I had thought to meet there; and third, the greatest wonder of all, to find myself there!"<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, it's only the saving grace of God in Christ that gets any of us into the kingdom. Christ's death that secures forgiveness of our sins, and his resurrection that opens the way to eternal life, are our door into the presence of God.

This doesn't mean that there's nothing for us to do. Personal faith, called forth and created by the gospel, is what connects you to what Christ has done for you, so that you experience it in your own life, and become one of his followers. As with those first disciples, so with you. Only in knowing who Jesus is will you know who you are. Only in seeing what he is about will you know what you're supposed to be about. Only in realizing what he has done for you will you realize what you're supposed to be doing.

If you're a disciple of Jesus, you too have been given keys. Keys that open the doors of life, the life of God's kingdom. You may not rank up there with Peter in the larger scope of church history and hierarchy, but you still have your part to play in interpreting the gospel to the world. That's what Jesus is talking about in his instructions to Peter. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (v. 19). Though there's certainly not complete agreement on what this language of "binding and loosing" is all about, there is a pretty solid consensus that it has to do with how the rabbis and other Jewish teachers provided interpretations of the Torah, the revelation of God's will through his commandments. Having a commandment was one thing, but knowing how to apply that commandment in specific situations was another. To "bind and loose" involved taking the Scriptures and spelling out in greater detail what was permitted and what was not permitted in particular circumstances and contexts. So when Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom, he's authorizing Peter, the primary disciple, to take his teachings and interpret them for the community of disciples.

Later on in Matthew (18:18), a similar kind of authority is given to the church as a whole. Peter may have a special responsibility as the chief teacher, as well as a representative and model, but the whole community of disciples is obligated to interpret and apply the teachings of Jesus and the good news of God's kingdom. Thus, my own ministry of preaching this morning, to stand here before you and interpret the gospel for our lives, individually and together. And our Sunday School teachers, or other small group Bible study leaders, instructing you and helping you to discern how the teachings of Jesus apply to your lives and the lives of those you interact with on a daily basis. And you yourself, in your daily engagement with Scripture through personal study and devotions. These church keys, these kingdom keys, haven't been distributed to just a small group of the spiritually select, but to the whole fellowship of God's people in Christ.

And with these keys has come a great promise from our Lord. He guarantees us that as he builds his church, the power of hell, the very forces of sin and death, are not stronger, and will not prevail, over the kingdom community that he's constructing. This means that our assurance isn't grounded in our own power to overcome, but on the good news that Jesus Christ has already overcome all the things that oppose and resist God's reign. That's the foundation of our worship, work, and witness. I like the way that Father John McKenzie has put it when he says,

If the church were to lose its hierarchy, its clergy, its vast collection of buildings, its stores of learning amassed over the centuries, even the text of its sacred books, and had to face the world with nothing but the living presence of the Risen Jesus and its mission to proclaim the Good News to all nations and people, it would be no less a church than the church of Peter and Paul was. Perhaps it might be more of a church than it is now.<sup>2</sup>

Being the church isn't primarily about having all the things that we have, including our building with its many doors, and the keys to unlock them, and the processes we go through to determine who gets which keys. No, being the church is primarily about using the kingdom keys that Jesus has given to each of us, so that we can help others know that because of Christ, the doors of life have been opened, and they too can come through the gates into God's reign. You and I are authorized to give people access to what God is doing, not to stand in their way. We're sent to confess, with Peter and all believers, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, so that heaven's power may rule in their lives and in the things of this earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *Our Daily Bread* (March 21, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> John McKenzie, *Leadership* (Vol. 15, No. 2).