



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Easter 2
April 24, 2022

Words of Life

John 20:19–31

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

To those sitting in prison, facing a death sentence, filled with fear at what awaits them, nothing is more welcome than someone coming with a message of pardon and release. Those are words of life in a world of fear and death.

“Words of Life.” That’s what we hear in our readings today – in all three of them: the First Reading, from Acts; the Epistle, from Revelation; and the Holy Gospel, from John. Words of life, to people sitting in prison, overcoming their fear and giving them the faith, the boldness, and the final victory they need. And the good news is: These words of life come not only to the people in our readings, they come to us, too. Hallelujah!

Throughout the season of Easter, the readings come from these three places – Acts, Revelation, and the Gospel of John. In these readings, we hear the glorious and life-giving message of Christ’s resurrection and what that means for us. It starts today, and the common thread running through these lessons today is that in each one of them the words of life come to those who are locked up and imprisoned.



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Now, in the Gospel according to St. John, the people involved were not literally locked-up in an actual prison, but they might as well have been, for it was a prison of their own making. “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews. . . .” The disciples were hiding out, cowering behind locked doors, terrified of what might happen to them. Their master had been crucified, and they were afraid that something similar could happen to them. Jesus’ enemies had been out for blood. And they’d gotten their way with Him; they had Him put to death. Would they come looking for His followers? You can understand, can’t you, why the doors were locked.

But, if a mighty stone in front of a tomb couldn’t stop Jesus, neither would the locks on those doors. Indeed, the resurrected and glorified Lord passed right through them and stood among them, saying, “Peace be with you.” Here are words of life and peace and pardon. To disciples who had deserted their Master in His hour of need, the gracious Christ came with full forgiveness. “Peace be with you.” More than an ordinary greeting, this was a holy absolution. And then the risen Lord showed them the cost at which that absolution came. He showed them His hands and His side – hands still bearing the marks of the nails that pinned Him to the cross; His side, still bearing the gash of the spear that had made sure He was dead. Yes, Christ, even in His resurrection, still bears the marks of His crucifixion. This is how He wants to be identified. This is how He wants to be known – always as the One who was crucified for our transgressions, the Lamb who was slain, by whose blood we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

“Peace be with you.” These words, spoken by the crucified and risen Savior, are words of life, words of forgiveness to faithless disciples, words of reassurance to fearful followers. And Christ met their amazement by showing them that it was really Him. They were not seeing a ghost. Nor were they hallucinating. This truly was their risen Lord, standing there in front of them, risen with a body they could see and touch.

Their fear then gave way to gladness. Again, a second time, Jesus spoke peace to them, this time empowering them for their mission as apostles, as His witnesses. He would be sending them out very soon, so they could speak His words of life and forgiveness to others.

But one of their company was not there that day. And, when he did join them again, he didn’t believe their report that the Lord had risen and appeared to them. Hearing the words, it seems, was not enough for Thomas. He had to see for himself.

A week later, though Jesus had shown Himself to the disciples, had proved to them that He was alive, risen from the dead, the doors were still locked. I guess fear doesn’t die easily. Nonetheless, Jesus came again and stood among them. This time, though, He came for the specific benefit of Thomas, so that he wouldn’t miss out, so that he wouldn’t be locked in unbelief, but instead believe and be saved. His words let Thomas know that He knew about his initial refusal to believe. And this moved Thomas to repent. And then he confessed his faith in who Jesus is: “My Lord and my God!”



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This is good. But, Thomas, the words should have been enough. So Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

And here we find ourselves in the story, for this perfectly describes our situation, doesn't it? No, we weren't there in that room, either on that first Easter Sunday or a week later. We've not seen the risen Christ standing before us. We've not touched His hands or His side. Still He comes to us and speaks His words of life to us, and – to the amazement of the world – we believe! This is a miracle, beloved! A gift! And Jesus pronounces us “blessed”: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” That's *us!* – you and me He's talking about!

So, how does it happen? How is it that people here and all around the world – for more than 2000 years now – how is it that we believe in, and take our stand on, a man rising from the dead whom we have never seen? Friends, this is the power of those words of life. They work! They create faith in our hearts. They're living and powerful words, active and creative words. They create faith in the Savior they proclaim.

This is why God has seen fit to have these words recorded for us in the Bible, so that we who've not seen Christ in person will still hear and believe and be saved. John tells us that this is his purpose in writing them down: “These are written,” he says, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

The inscripturated gospel, which we read in the Bible, which we hear read from the lectern and preached from the pulpit, and the “insacramented” gospel, which makes Holy Baptism and Holy Communion the means of grace that they are (the good news of peace and pardon and life in Christ) – this gospel word brings and bestows the gifts of which it speaks, as well as giving us the ability to receive these gifts. This is saving faith, created *by these words*. “These are written” – and read and preached and sacramented – “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

Words of life to people in prison: This is the theme running through our lessons today. God's words of life free His people – they free *us* – from our fear of speaking out and confessing Christ. If God is for us, who can stand against us? Our life is secure in Christ. Threats and persecution can't shut us up. Oh, they can shut us in a prison, but they can't shut us up. This is a word of encouragement for the church today, beloved. This is a word of encouragement for those, living as we do, in a world of increasing hostility to the Christian faith. God's words of life free us from our fears and give us boldness and courage to live and speak as Christians.

To the apostle John, Jesus said, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

Oh, what wonderful words of life! Words to free us from our fears and give us hope to carry on, whatever the challenge may be that confronts us. Jesus died – He died for your salvation, for your forgiveness. All your sins have been paid for, in full, by the



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precious blood of Christ! There's no condemnation for you. God is pleased with you on account of His Son. And this Jesus *is* the living one. "I died," He says, "and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." *Those* doors that would want to lock you in forever, those prison doors of Death and Hell, *they* cannot keep Jesus out. He owns the keys to Death and Hades. He is their master. He is their lord. He gained title to those places when He overcame Satan by His death on the cross. The devil has been defeated. Death has been defeated. The gates of hell shall not prevail. The final victory has been won, by our living Lord, and He gives you a share in His victory through His words of life.

You have nothing to fear, beloved. Death has been stripped of its power. Life – new life and eternal salvation – this is what Christ is giving you today and every Lord's day from now on into eternity. And the words of life will do their job. Hallelujah! In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen