

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
St. Luke 7:11-17

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus said, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death." (Revelation 1:18) The exercise of this office of the keys is on display for you in today's Gospel lesson. There, as Jesus enters a village called Nain, He and His party encounter another party of people.

Jesus' party is one of life. He has come into the world that you would have life and have it to the fullest. (cf. John 10:10) Along the way, He gathered disciples as He taught. He healed and performed many wondrous miracles. And He gathered a following. His party, that day, was generally joyful and hopeful and expectant. The people had seen this Jesus do some pretty amazing stuff—some of them probably had some of that amazing stuff happen to them—and they knew Him to be the promised Messiah of the Scriptures, today's Old Testament; greater things were going to happen. This party was entering the village.

From Nain proceeded an opposite party, and it was heading in the opposite direction. A widow followed a bier. In the box was not her husband, however, but her only son. This woman had lost everything, having previously lost her husband, and her party, gloomy as it is, was heading out of the city to the necropolis—the city of the dead, the graveyard—to bury all that is left of her livelihood.

"I have the keys of Hades and of Death," Jesus declared. That day in Nain, he showed the party of death how He would and could use those keys. He touched the box and called out to the young man, "I say to you, arise." The young man sat up and began to talk; Jesus presented him to his mother.

"A great prophet has risen up among us." "God has visited His people." The "opposite" party has become part of the first party, even if they remain in Nain.

Of course, that wasn't the only or last time Jesus exercised this office of the keys. On a very good Friday, Jesus laid down His own life. On a cross outside of Jerusalem, the keys unlocked death for the Son of God, not to mention Hades, and He ushered Himself into death, the death of a Roman criminal. You may want to think and say that the Jews or the Romans took Jesus' life, and they are rightly the instruments that Jesus used to lay down His life, but you cannot argue with what Jesus said:

Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father. (John 10:17-18)

Still, Jesus is the keyholder, and He didn't remain in Death or Hades, but took His life back up again. On the third day, the stone had been rolled away, and the new grave where Jesus had been laid was empty. He appeared to many of His disciples, whereat He told them to go into all the world, to baptize and preach the Gospel to every nation, and to forgive and retain sins. (cf. Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; John 20:23)

Jesus gave them the Office of the Keys. Now, you have learned that this Office is that peculiar power of the church to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent. You confess to believe that when a called minister of Christ deals with you according to His divine command to forgive or retain your sins, it's just as valid and certain as if Christ your dear Lord dealt with you Himself.

In essence, the church's peculiar power—the Office of the Keys—is no different than the office of the keys that Jesus exercised in Nain and on Golgotha, at least in how they are both in use among the people of God. For, in the forgiveness of your sins, the gates of Death and Hades are shut to you, and the gates of heaven are opened. Conversely, if your sins are retained, then the gates of heaven are

shut and your path to Death and Hades is made plain to you.

This is all summed up in what St. Paul wrote: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23) Your sin will kill you. There is no way around it—you sin, you break the Ten Commandments, you do nothing your God instructs you to do. For all of this you deserve to die—for each and every sin; in fact, each sin deserves the death penalty according to a just and holy God. How many death sentences are you due? Too many to count.

The only way to escape these death sentences is by some external power, for something to be unlocked to you, for something to be taken away from you and given to you. That to be taken away from you is that by which you have earned your death sentences—your sin and sins—and that which is given to you, then, is the gift of eternal life. This all comes to you by way of God-given penitence, which sees and confesses your sin for what it is, by which the gates of heaven are then unlocked.

It’s a miracle that you’re still alive. It’s the miracle of God’s patience and grace. And it’s all for the sake of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, your Lord.

You see, that sin didn’t just “go away.” Yes, it was taken from you, but so was the sentence. It was Christ who removed your sin from you and assumed it into His own flesh. He also bore the sentence for your sin. “And for your life He died.” This is the miracle: His office of keys is at work in His dying and rising, and your death to sin and rising to newness of life in Him.

Therefore, the Office of the Keys was exercised for you at the font. There, you were drowned like hard-hearted Pharaoh, like all the sinful world in the flood, and your Old Man died. But you were brought through those waters to newness of life, and life in Christ, one of the forgiveness of sins. Your life apart from Christ was headed toward Hades and Death, but through baptism, the gates of Death are shut for you and the gates of heaven unlocked.

This Office of the Keys is also exercised to you every week. You see, every one of you is the son of the widow of Nain. Every Sunday, this place is filled with the walking dead, for just like the widow’s son, you bear in your own flesh the wages of your sin. You are at the same time dead, but alive—at the same time sinner and saint. Now, no one else here may know what your sin is, but everyone here knows that the person next to them is a sinner, and for that sin they should die—they should be dead. The truth of the matter is that you all should be, but the fact remains that Jesus died for your lives. In God-given penitence, you confess your sins, week after week, and the Keys are used to shut Hades and Death to you, and bring you to life and toward the unlocked gates of heaven.

The Office of the Keys is an ongoing miracle. Time after time, it shuts the gates to Hades and Death for the penitent, and unlock the gates of heaven. It is used to bring the dead to life. It is used for your benefit, dear hearers, for the sake of Jesus Christ, to declare to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.