

**BUILT ON THE ROCK!
ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL, APOSTLE SUNDAY**

Matthew 16:13-19

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Grace, peace and mercy from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN!

Who is Jesus? That question doesn't need to be asked here, does it? This is a Christian church, a Lutheran congregation. That's the kind of question we ought to be asking the world. Have you ever asked someone that question? What sort of answer did you receive? If not, how would you answer that question?

Questions abound in this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus asked the disciples: ***"Who do men say that I am? Who do you say that I am?"*** Jesus first asked this question of His disciples at Caesarea Philippi, a Roman town at the foot of Mt. Herman. Baal had once been worshipped there by the locals. Then Pan by the Greeks. Herod the Great built a big marble temple to Caesar Augustus there. This was the place where Caesar Augustus was confessed as a lord and god, and here Jesus turns to His disciples and asks them, ***"Who do men say that I am?"***

The answers were varied and predictable. Some say, John the Baptizer, returned from the dead while others say Elijah, who is supposed to appear before the Messiah's coming. Some say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. In other words, Jesus was thought to be a great religious man among religious men. Responses just like people today when they want to say something nice about Jesus without really confessing anything important. He's a great teacher, an example (WWJD: What Would Jesus Do?), an inspiration, a buddy, a friend, a healer, a guru even a motivational resource. All of it sounds nice and even true. But it's not nearly enough. It's not even close to the real truth.

"But who do you say that I am?" Now He gets to the heart of the matter. Never mind what the polls say, what the world says, what do you believe? Simon Peter speaks up first. He always does. Good old Simon. He's like the pesky kid in class who has all the answers, although not always right. ***"You are the Christ (the Messiah), the Son of the living God."*** Peter gets this right though, at least on paper. Jesus is the anointed One, the Messiah of Israel, the fulfillment of what God promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, to Moses and the prophets. And He is the Son of the living God. You couldn't get a more correct, more orthodox answer than that.

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah (which means Simon son of John, or Simon Johnson). You didn't think this up on your own. This came straight from my Father who is in heaven." No confessional merit badge for Simon Peter. To confess Jesus as the Christ and Son of God is not of our doing, by virtue of our own religious intuition or intelligence. The Catechism puts it this way: *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him."* Or even confess Him. ***"No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit"*** (1 Corinthians 12:3). If that were not the case, only the smart could be saved. But you see that's not the case so there is hope for the rest of us!

Confessing Jesus as Christ and Son of God, Simon is rock solid. In fact, Jesus calls him exactly that - Petros - Peter, is the Rock. Peter should be called "Rocky". You can almost hear the theme music playing in

the background can't you. You are "Rocky," and on the rock of your confession, which God the Father put into your mouth, I will build my church, my gathered people.

The church is built on Peter's confession and not his person. There's nothing solid about Peter at all! The church is not some personality cult of Peter, or any other man, whether pope, bishop, or televangelist. In the very next paragraph, Peter the great confessor is Peter the denier. He later even denies knowing Jesus to a little servant girl. Hardly living up to the name Rocky is he? Rather than rock more like dirt or sand. Dirt as in Adam, the man of the earth, the first denier, dirt such a dirt clod but not rock.

If the church were built on Peter it would be on a slippery slope. It would be an idol's temple, a constantly changing and failing establishment. But the church is built on the rock of Peter's confession not on his person or any person save Jesus. Peter as confessor doesn't point to himself but to Jesus. And you can't be more rock solid than the crucified and risen Jesus. Even the gates of Hell - sin, death, and the devil - cannot prevail against such a confession.

A house is only as sturdy as the foundation on which it sits. The hidden strength of the Church is down at her foundation. Not her glorious cathedrals, her splendid liturgies, her finely-honed doctrines, her institutions and influence, or even her vast numbers. The church's strength is that she is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, with Christ - the rejected Rock - as her cornerstone. And she is bolted to that rock foundation through the faith that confesses Jesus as Christ and Son of the living God.

Did Peter realize what his words meant that day? No, not yet. When Jesus explained to His disciples that being the Christ meant that He must suffer, die, and on the third day rise, Peter pulled Him aside and scolded Him. **"God forbid it! This must never happen to you, I won't let it!"** That wasn't what Peter had in mind when he said, "You are the Christ." "Christ" for Peter meant God's anointed warrior, the divine terminator, the conqueror, the Messianic king who comes to put Israel back on the map again, prosperity on earth.

To confess Jesus as Christ and Son of God is to confess Him crucified and risen from the dead. There's no other Jesus, no other way to be Christ than dying and rising. This is the way Death is defeated, sin atoned, life restored - by His death on a cross once for all people, once for all time. Those who would flatter Jesus with pious titles, but refuse His bloody death are on very shaky ground. Even "Petros the Rock" became the devil's spokesman. **"Get behind me Satan, you are a hindrance to me,"** Jesus said to him.

You either speak for Christ or speak for the anti-christ. There's no middle ground, no neutral place, no happy medium, no place to run and hide when the Jesus question is asked. Either Jesus is Lord or He isn't. Either Jesus is the Messiah of Israel or He isn't. Either Jesus is the Son of the living God or He isn't. And either the church is a communion of saints proclaiming Jesus the Christ crucified and risen for the life of the world, or it's a synagogue of Satan.

Confession is a crisis of faith and disbelief. What you believe with your heart, you confess with your lips. Thanks be to God He doesn't leave it up to us to decide our own way or figure it out for ourselves. We wouldn't, and we couldn't. To confess Jesus as Christ, as Lord is God's gift to you, worked by the Word and the Spirit. It is given you in your Baptism to say, "Jesus is Lord." Consider yourselves "blessed." Blessed are you, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but the Father through the Son in the Spirit.

On this rock of confession where Jesus is proclaimed Christ and Son of God, there the keys of the kingdom are found. Keys are authority - the authority to open and shut, to bind and loose. It's a huge thing to have the keys. When we take ownership of a house or a car, we get the keys. When we entrust someone with our stuff, we give them the keys. I remember when I got my first set of keys. I could open what my parents had shut, any time day or night. Freedom. Permission. What are kids always asking for? "Dad, can I have the keys?"

Imagine having the keys of heaven. Now there's a set of doors! Jesus promises the keys to Peter of all people. Not to make him bishop or pope, but to make him preacher, confessor, and servant. "The things you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven. The things you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." You don't have to search for the keys to heaven like some misplaced set of car keys stuck in a forgotten pants pocket. "Now where did God put them?"

The keys of heaven are found right smack in the middle of that gathering of solid as a rock Christ-confessors, even as few as two or three gathered in the Name of Jesus, the congregation of saints. The church has an "office of the keys," the office of the holy ministry, where the keys are always at work for certain so that you might know and be certain that heaven is open to you and that your sins are forgiven.

The keys of heaven belong to Jesus, to whom "all authority in heaven and on earth" has been given. They do what He did for all on the cross - binding sin, death and the devil, loosing sinners from their guilt and shame, freeing them to be the children of God, swinging wide the gates of salvation.

You are all in on this, built on the rock, baptized, believing, confessing Jesus along with Simon Peter. Every Baptism, every word of absolution, every proclamation of Jesus, every communion in the Body and the Blood, the keys of heaven are turning - binding and loosing, opening heaven to faith and shutting it to unbelief.

Jesus warned Peter and the rest not to tell anyone that He was the Christ. Don't worry. He's not talking to you here. You can tell anyone and everyone that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of the living God. They just had to wait until Jesus died and rose, until the darkness and the wood and nails and blood; until the rock was rolled away and reveals the empty tomb and the body risen and seen and touched. Then the world would have its rock solid proof, the hard evidence. Crucified and risen He is most certainly the Christ, the Son of most high God for you.

There is nothing more certain and more sure than Jesus. Jesus is the Christ, Jesus is the Son of the living God. Jesus is the Giver of the keys of heaven. For you, my dear baptized believers, know Him and confess Him for you are as solid as the Rock who saves you. For Jesus is the Rock of your salvation. In Him all your sins are forgiven, in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, in Jesus name, amen and Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN