

The Keys of Death and Hell, the Real Fruit of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

by **C. F. W. Walther** (Translated by **Rev. Donald E. Heck**)

First Sunday After Easter

Lord Jesus! You were dead; and behold, now you are alive forevermore and have the keys of death and hell. Death swallowed you up, but you were its plague; hell took you prisoner, but you were its destruction; the poisonous sting of the hellish serpent bruised your heel, but your bruised heel crushed its head. We therefore joyfully sing of the victory in the tents of the righteous. Your right arm, oh Jesus, has gotten the victory. And -- oh joy! -- yours was the struggle, but ours the booty; you wish to distribute it through your holy Word! Oh therefore open our hearts as the Word of that victory is preached to us again so that you will not pour out your Easter booty among us in vain. Awaken every dead person to life; grant grace, forgiveness, and righteousness to every one of us laden with guilt; strengthen every one who is weak and sick; fill all the sorrowing with joy; yes, give every one that Easter blessing which he needs so that henceforth we all by virtue of your resurrection can struggle against sin, death, and hell, be victorious in that severe struggle even here, and some day in all eternity triumph with you in heaven. Amen.

My dearly redeemed hearers.

"The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed!" is the message which 1900 years ago spread among the sorrowing, weeping, and lamenting disciples; and as the rising sun evaporates the dew, so this message quickly dried the tears of the weeping, filled their grief-torn heart with inexpressible joy, and turned their secret laments into loud cries of exultation. "The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed." Throughout all ages these words have also remained the password of Christians, the shining inscription of their banners under which confident and joyful in faith and hope they have continually suffered and struggled. "The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed" is the message resounding to this very day throughout city and country, throughout the entire Christian world, and everywhere it awakens once again festal joy and holy jubilation. Even the non-Christian sees himself irresistibly carried along by this stream of Easter exultation; he joins the hymns of triumph which believers today sing with joy-filled hearts.

Why is it that Christ's resurrection has for thousands of years and still does move the whole world to such joy? Have not other people returned from the realm of the dead? Why is not the awakening of the widow's son at Zaraphath through Elijah celebrated? the awakening of the Shunamite's son through Elisha? the awakening of Tabitha by Peter, Eutychus by Paul, and the daughter of Jairus, the young man at Nain, and Lazarus by Christ himself?

Why is it that again today Christians in spirit gather around Christ's empty grave and sing their united hallelujahs?

True, there are especially in our days those who celebrate the Easter festival only because Christ's resurrection is such a glorious proof of the fact that despite all lies and malice, despite all hostile cunning and power, truth and innocence must finally conquer; they suppose that God the Father awakened Christ from the dead because he died for the sake of truth and righteousness.

There are others who join the Christian's Easter jubilation only because Christ's resurrection is such an incontestable support for the fact that man's soul does not fly away in death, that man is immortal, and that even his body corrupting in the grave waits for a future life.

As certain and important as all this is, they are merely lovely, green, scented leaves on the tree of life of our Savior's resurrection, not the real, sweet, golden, heavenly fruits themselves.

What would it profit us if we would see in Christ's resurrection that truth and innocence must always conquer, since it is truth and innocence which we human beings lack? What would it profit us if in Christ's resurrection we would have merely the guarantee that the human soul is immortal and his body is not the grave's prisoner forever, since we do not have the guarantee that our immortality and our future resurrection will be a blessed one? The victory of truth and innocence, the immortality of the soul, and the resurrection of the body are comforting only for perfectly righteous and holy people; if we ponder this aright, this can only fill sinners such as we are by nature with terror.

But praise be the name of the Lord forever and ever! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a victory of truth and righteousness over lies and malice: But in this way, that it brings truth and righteousness to the very ones who are unrighteous. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is indeed the guarantee of the immortality of man's soul and the resurrection of man's body; and not that alone but also of a blessed immortality and a blessed resurrection.

David already knew of these fruits of the Messiah's resurrection; listen to him exult: "The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous; the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly. The right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly. Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord. ... The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118 15, 16, 19, 22-24).

The Prophet Hosea also knew of the fruits of the resurrection; for thus the Lord spoke through his mouth: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death; O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction." (Hosea 13:14). The Prophet Micah also knew that, writing: "The breaker is come up before them; they have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it; and their king shall pass before them, and the Lord on the head of them." (Micah 2:13).

You see, victory over death and hell, the breaking of all bands of this power, that, that is the real fruit of the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the subject of our Easter celebration. Since it is not enough merely to know the story of the resurrection and consider it to be true, since everything really depends upon being partakers of its glorious, blessed fruit, let us now examine that fruit so that everyone may be moved to stretch out his hand of faith confidently for them; for these fruits are forbidden to no one; on the contrary, it is only by partaking of them that the future partaking of the forbidden fruit of paradise will again be permitted. May the Resurrected himself now grant us his enlightening, life-giving, and blessed presence to do that!

Scripture text: Revelation 1:18. *I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.*

In the Gospel for Easter Sunday you heard the story of the resurrection of the Lord, the remembrance of which we celebrate also today. If we ask about its real fruit we find this stated the most clearly in our text by the Lord himself in the Revelation of St. John. There he says, "I was dead, and, behold, I am alive for evermore; and have the keys of hell and death." Upon the basis of these words, which explain all Easter texts, uttered by the Lord himself, permit me to present to you

THE KEYS OF DEATH AND HELL, THE REAL FRUIT OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST.

I will show you two things:

1. The Extent to Which These Keys are the Real Fruit, and
2. Why This is so Important for Us and All Men.

[1. The Extent to Which These Keys are the Real Fruit]

Since Christ is not only a true man but at the same time the true God and eternal life, there is absolutely no doubt that, insofar as he is the living God, he has the keys of hell and death; he has complete power over hell and death, and has had it from eternity.

However, when the Resurrected says to John: "I was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore; and have the keys of hell and death," it is plain he is speaking of something entirely different; he indicates that he has received the keys of hell and death as a fruit of his coming to life again, or his resurrection; now he has them in still another, in an entirely special sense.

The question arises: Which is this sense?

My friends, if we are to understand it, we must go back in our meditation to the first people. When they fell into sin and through sin into death and under God's wrath, not only they but the whole human race had fallen. The apostle says: "As by one man sin entered in to the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Romans 5:12).

Since that disastrous fall into sin the whole world became a land of death, and all humanity the booty of death. Let the wise speak against it what they may, one cannot argue or philosophize away this fact: As long as there are men, it is a general, universal, daily, and hourly experience: Man must die. No wisdom guards one against death, it cannot be outwitted; no riches, it cannot be bribed; no might, it cannot be overpowered; no majesty, it is not blinded or frightened. The aged and youth, the noble and humble, the wise and simple, the rich and poor, the king and the beggar, the honorable and the wicked, in short, everyone who is called a man must die. All peoples have this proverb: There is no cure for death. And alas, to him whom the mystery of Christ's resurrection is not yet revealed, no one can guarantee what his fate after death will be. And if he asks his conscience, it will say: Death is not the end; after death your judgment waits; and after death hell, for you are a sinner and God is a holy and righteous God.

Now if there really is a key with which man can lock up death and hell so as to be able to rise from death into life, from hell into heaven, what can, what must this key be?

Since nothing else but sin brought us into the power of death and to the brink of hell, nothing but righteousness, and above all a perfect righteousness which avails before God, can deliver us.

And behold, righteousness, and at that a perfect righteousness which avails before God it is which Christ brought to light when he returned to life and gloriously arose from his grave.

God knew in advance that man would fall into sin, death, and hell, but was not willing that a single being created in his image should perish; in incomprehensible love he made this agreement with his Son; if the Son would assume the nature of fallen man, as a holy God-man let the sins of all men be imputed to Him, and atone for them by suffering and dying, then the Father would impute his Son's atonement to all men, and all who would accept it in faith he would declare righteous.

And lo, in incomprehensible love the Son of God willingly consented to this amazing agreement and really became a man.

Every time we see the God-man, from His conception until His rest in the bosom of the earth, we must consider Him as burdened not with His own sin but with ours.

Burdened with our sins He came upon this world; burdened with our sins He walked upon this world; burdened with our sins He after 33 years of humility, disgrace, and misery appeared in Gethsemane, fell down before God, with the presentiment of His death on the cross fell upon His face, sweat bloody sweat, wrestled with death, and cried: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup," He meant the cup of His death on the cross, "pass from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matthew 26:39).

Behold, God's wrath was not yet appeased; the satisfaction of his righteousness was not yet complete; the Father did not take the cup from him; he permitted him to be refreshed by an angel but only to strengthen his human nature for the last, the worst suffering.

Therefore when we see Christ brought before Caiaphas and Pilate's judgment throne and hear the sentence pronounced upon him: "He is guilty of death," we dare not look only at the actions of men. Though pronounced unholy by men, it was at the same time the just verdict of God the Father. Christ himself draws our attention to it before Pilate when he said: "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above." (John 19:11).

Therefore God himself pronounced the verdict upon Christ: You are guilty of death, when he who in the place of all sinners and burdened with their sins stood before him, the Judge of all flesh.

So we finally see Christ as the Lamb of God who carried away the sins of the world, going to Golgotha; here in inexpressible torment, rejected by heaven and earth, forsaken by God and man, loudly lamenting, he dies bleeding on the accursed tree of the cross; yes, the burden of our sins lay even upon His cold, stiff, wounded body, and forced Him to go into the depths of the grave.

And thus God the Father consummated everything in his Son, which he had thought to consummate in all men because of their sins, even the sentence: "You shall surely die," and: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

Christ had also drained the last drops in the bitter cup of atonement which was handed Him by his Father, even to dying on the cross, yes, being imprisoned in the subterranean prison of the grave.

But what happened? Awakened by God the Father himself, Christ on the third day arose from the dead. And how do we see him now? From the cradle to the cross we saw him bent over double from the burden of our sins and descend into the grave; but now we see him with head lifted high, free from all our sins.

Before we saw him walk about humbly even among his enemies in the form of a servant for the sake of our sins; but now we see him in divine, royal majesty being revealed alone to his believers.

Before we saw him sentenced by the Father himself as guilty of death because of our sins; now we see him released from all guilt and punishment by God the Father who himself awakened him from the dead.

Before we saw him cast into the debtor's prison of death and hell because of our sins; now we see him set free as one who has atoned for every debt.

Before we saw him treading the winepress of God's wrath for our sins; now we see him surrounded as though by a thousand suns by his Father's complete, perfect, eternal favor and grace.

Before we saw him wrestling amid sighs and groans with Satan and all the powers of hell for the sake of our sins; we saw him sink down as though conquered, wounded in his heel by the poisonous serpent of hell; and now we see him triumphing and Satan writhing helpless with crushed head under the feet of the almighty Victor.

Before we saw him wrestling with death for the sake of our sins; we saw him the booty of death; now we see him forever escaped from the prison of death and hell, clothed with a glorified body, never again to be touched by the broken sting of death.

Before we heard him lament: "I am a worm and not a man;" now we hear him exclaim in divine majesty: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. ... I was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, and have the keys of hell and death."

So now it is clear what the Resurrected intends to say: He testifies that after his resurrection from the dead he has the keys of hell and death; he has power over hell and death, not only as God but also as God-man and Savior, not only for himself but for all, for whom and in whose stead he descended into the dwelling place of death and hell as Surretor and Substitute for all sinners, as Mediator between God and man, as Plenipotentiary of heaven and earth.

For as the whole sinful world was condemned and punished in him, that is, in his death, so now in him, that is, in his resurrection, the whole sinful world is also absolved and justified.

As all humanity fell in and with the first Adam, so now it is also risen in and with the second Adam; as the first Adam bequeathed sin, death, and hell to all mankind, so he has not bequeathed to it righteousness and salvation.

[2. Why This is so Important for Us and All Men]

Thus, my friends, we have seen the extent to which the keys of hell and death are the real fruit of Christ's resurrection; let us in the second place ponder why this is so important for us and all men.

The first reason is this: Because Christ has placed these keys into his Word and Sacraments; by faith everyone can take them, open death and hell, leave their prisons, and be saved. If Christ would have wanted the keys of hell and death for himself alone, it would not have taken his bitter suffering and death nor his glorious resurrection; for as God he had these keys from eternity. But as Christ did not struggle with death and hell for himself and did not let himself be swallowed by these foes of mankind for himself, but only in the stead and in behalf of men, so he also did not conquer these foes for himself but for us. Since the key which alone opens hell and death is a perfect righteousness which avails before God, every person must appropriate to himself Christ's righteousness which he brought to life, if he does not wish to remain the prisoner of death and hell.

And Christ took care of that as well. When he had risen from the dead, he said to his disciples: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth," namely, I have the keys of hell and death. "Go ye therefore," he continues, "and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned."

You see, that by virtue of the authority over hell and death which Christ received in his resurrection for all men, he commands the Gospel to be preached to all creatures and to baptize in the name of the Triune God with the promise that he who believes and is baptized will be saved.

Hence he placed the keys of hell and death in to his Gospel and ordained that through faith in that Gospel everyone is to take it.

How important it is, how inexpressibly comforting, that Christ, the Resurrected, has the keys of hell and death! Now anyone who wants them can have them. He need but hear and believe the Gospel and the keys of hell and death, and also the keys of life and heaven are laid into his hands; for he who has unlocked the prison of death enters into life, and he who opens the prison of hell enters into heaven.

Oh my dear hearers, do not let this be said to you in vain but with both hands seize it quickly today on the last day of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do not say that the prison of sin, death, and hell, in which you may still be, is locked with iron, yes, with diamond gates, so that it is impossible for you to free yourselves.

Bear in mind: He who has the correct key can open a gate locked a thousand times. But now the key of hell and death is in your grasp: it is the righteousness of Jesus Christ which is in the Gospel, which is being preached to you right now. Believe, oh believe it, and you have that key. If you hold onto it with your hand of faith until your end, you will never see death.

Perhaps many will say: Do not believers die anyhow? I answer: No! No believer really dies. Of course it seems as if they die just as well as the unbelievers; but it merely seems that way. They fall gently and peacefully asleep in what we call death because it looks like death; their souls, having the keys of hell and death, go into a blessed eternity, and their bodies merely wait a short time in the chamber of the grave for the awakening on the happy Easter morning of judgment day by the omnipotent voice of their head, Jesus Christ, who has already preceded them.

That the keys of hell and death are the real fruit of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is incomparably important for us and all men, because Christ alone has these keys, and therefore all

who reject Christ must remain in the prison of death and hell. There is no hope for them. They cannot be saved.

Yes, know that, you unbeliever, you who either do not want to believe that Christ has actually died and risen from the dead, or who do not want to believe that he died for your sins and rose again for your justification -- know this: you are a sinner just as all men are; you cannot deny that and you are already in the land and in the power of death because of God's holy wrath. However, you do not have the key to open the prison of death, this annex to hell, for you do not have that righteousness which avails before the holy God. Woe to you when death will come as the executioner of hell to fetch you away! You will writhe in vain upon your sickbed in order to burst away from the strong hands of death; you will seek in vain for a key which will open the gates of the realm of the dead; for you will discover that your own righteousness can slam heaven shut in your face but cannot open it; without the power to resist and save yourself you will be hurled by death in the dark abyss of hell in order to hear there in all eternity the sermon that Christ really did rise and had redeemed also you, that nothing but your unbelief has eternally damned you.

Well, then, you and all you who until this hour have not believed, hear today the majestic Word of the risen Redeemer: "I was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore; and have the keys of hell and of death," and accept, oh accept in faith these great, blessed words in which lies your death and your life, your hell and your heaven! Confess that you are sinners and as sinners fall before him, the only Lord of life and death, of heaven and hell; in faith grasp his knees and with Thomas cry: "My Lord and my God!" -- and it is done; in the very same moment Christ will hand also you the keys of hell and death, and then you can also with Paul mock hell and death and exclaim: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? the sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Amen. Kyrie eleison! Amen! Amen!