

# Easter Leftovers, especially a Nagging Question about John 20:23

Colleagues,

Easter was a succulent season this year. I say that as one with the odd weekly job of chewing on tough texts so as to spit out something that others might find nutritious.

Not that my teachers of yore described the preaching task in quite this way, but there it is. It's what we preachers do, one bird feeding other birds with whatever she's managed to masticate in the days or hours prior. Put that way, of course, it shouldn't surprise us at all when some of those other birds find the procedure less than pleasant; though that's a topic in itself, and not the one I want to focus on today.

Instead, let me thank and praise Almighty God for the gift that keeps on giving, and giving, and giving some more. I mean these texts that the lectionary system returns us to, year after year or three-year cycle after three-year cycle, as the case may be. One might think that after twenty or thirty bouts with, say, the great gospel of Easter's second Sunday, John 20:19ff., there would be nothing left to excite a preacher's taste buds. Yet somehow there is, and always will be, assuming a willingness to chew longer and harder than you may have the year before, with nerve ends searching and straining for flavors as yet unnoticed.

So much the better if your eyes are also on the lookout for the occasional translators' blunder. There are plenty of these laying around in most any translation. A few are egregious, others not so much. NRSV makes one of the former when it has

Jesus telling Thomas not to “doubt” (Jn. 20:27). As I’ve grumbled in the past, the Greek word here is *apistos*, an adjective, which KJV renders neatly with “faithless.” Why, I wonder, did the NRSV revisers not stick with that? Doubt and faithlessness are not the same thing. Doubt presumes a modicum of believing. We ought to tell our children that. It would relieve the angst that assorted authority figures have stirred up by barking at them not to be doubting Thomases. It would ease the angst all the more if we pointed them to the marvel of Matthew 28:17-18, where Jesus patently ignores the doubts of his feckless apostles and simply tells them to get to work. Come to think of it, that’s a move he’s still making in 2016, whenever any batch of his adherents gets together. There’s not a one of us who isn’t of two or more minds about him, whether we admit to it or not. A bit of honesty on this score would be refreshing, and not only to our children, but to the Lord Himself, I’ll bet. If nothing else, it would ramp up our readiness to exult in his ridiculous patience with us.

So why is that honesty about our doubts so rarely forthcoming? The culprit, I’m convinced, is a stubborn, ingrained *apistia* of the worst kind. In its Lutheran version it says all the right things about justification by faith—then treats faith itself as a justifying work. One is right because one believes rightly. C.F.W. Walther warned against this very move in the fourteenth of his famous Theses on Law and Gospel. Even so, all too many of his Missouri Synod descendents keep making it as a matter of course. ELCA types do the same, with the frequent twist that ethical assumptions are substituted for doctrinal formulations as the thing to be firmly swallowed. Still, the point remains the same: it’s in the firmness of the swallowing that one is justified, appearing in the eyes of God and right-minded humankind as the right kind of person. No wonder children are as loathe as ever to pipe up in confirmation class with their

deepest, most troubling questions, these being the ones that would seem to challenge whatever assumptions the teacher is peddling.

If only those teachers would content themselves with peddling Christ, the One in whom we come out just fine, no matter what questions our minds and innards are roiling with on any particular day.

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Speaking of questions, here is one that dug its hooks into me on Easter 2 this year: might it be that most of us have been so very wrong for the past umpteen centuries in our reading of John 20:23?

Most all of you will know the text by heart. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." That's the NRSV version. It follows obediently in the English path that KJV charted. Jerome and Luther appear to have taken the same track in their respective translations, though my Latin and German are too shaky to say that with unflinching certainty.

In any case, the point appears obvious, at least in theory if not so much in practical application. On Easter night our Lord Christ, having commissioned his reclaimed disciples ("As the Father has sent me, so I send you"), now imbues them with the Holy Spirit and a consequent authority to do one of two things with respect to the sinners they'll encounter. They can forgive their sins, or they can choose not to forgive them. There's a cheekier way to put that. They can flick sins away (cf. Psalm 103:12) or they can stick them to the sinners responsible. Their call: flick 'em or stick 'em, the promise being that God will back them up whatever they decide.

This is wonderful to hear if you're the penitent on the receiving end of an absolution. It's tougher to credit when church authorities try to put the second clause into play and stick somebody with an anathema. Leo X was doubtless convinced that Luther would fry in hell on his say so. Wasn't God obliged, on Christ's say so, to enforce his pontiff's excommunicating bull? Luther scoffed at that idea as he dropped Leo's paper in the flames. His followers have kept the scoffing up over the centuries, at least where Roman pretensions are concerned. That hasn't kept them from groping for their own method of exercising Clause Two in a way that isn't risible to anyone beyond their immediate subgroups. They haven't found it yet. I think that no one has. The Amish may shun a miscreant, but who outside the shunning community imagines that God endorses this? In the days when Lutheran congregations excommunicated members for consorting with Masons, the ex-communicants simply strolled down the street and signed on with the Methodists. In Fort Wayne they started their own congregation and enrolled it with the ULCA. So which of God's Ft. Wayne groups was God backing up, the stickers or the flickers? I say this tongue in cheek, of course, but you'll get my drift.

History aside, what does one make of a "retaining of sins" in 2016? Did any preacher in the land attempt to address this on Easter 2 this year? If so, I'd be curious to know what he or she came up with. After that I'd plague her (or him) with my own new and sudden question.

Suppose the translators have been blowing it? Suppose our Lord is saying nothing at all in this text about sticking sinners with their sins? Suppose, indeed, that he's saying quite the opposite?

After all, as Raymond E. Brown points out in his commentary of Johannine commentaries, the Greek of 20:23 is opaque. I finally

noticed that myself this year. Then I grabbed for Brown, and found him confirming what I thought I was seeing. "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins are forgiven." That much is plain. Then: "If you hold (kratein) them, they are held," or, per Brown, "held fast." To which Brown adds, "It is not clear whether the object held is the men [sic] who committed the sins...or their sins. The latter is more likely by reason of parallelism with the first part of the verse. The phrasing 'to hold sins' is strange in Greek even as it is in English." (The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI (Anchor Bible, Vol. 29, Part A), 1024.)

I checked out kratein in the second edition of BAGD—for lay readers, the definitive English lexicon (i.e. dictionary) of New Testament Greek, where the shorthand title refers to its four key compilers, the German Walter Bauer, and the Americans William Arndt, Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick Danker. Verbs are listed there with their first person singular, present tense inflection, in this case krateo. The entry runs to nearly a full column (8.25" x 2.75") of fine print, and accounts for every instance of the verb's use in the New Testament. The basic definitions are "take into one's possession" and "hold." The nuances are many and varied, and bear listing. Some demand a present emphasis. "Arrest, take into custody, apprehend"; "take hold of, grasp, seize"; "attain." These are grouped together under the first definition. Under the second come the following: "hold with the hand"; "hold in the hand"; "hold upright, support"; "hold back or restrain from, hinder in"; "hold fast." To this last are appended sub-nuances: "prevent from escaping"; "hold in one's power"; "hold fast to someone or something and hence remain closely united to it or him"; "hold fast, keep hold of something that belongs to oneself so that it cannot be taken away"; "keep to oneself"; and last—seemingly least—"retain," where the reference, yes, is to John 20:23.

I wish Fred Danker were still among us so I could quiz him about this. In particular I'd want to know how he and colleagues settled on "retain." Was it out of deference to the prior English translators, or did they themselves see something in the structure and grammar of 20:23 that supported a distinct and separate listing, appended as a caboose of sorts to the main sense of the thing?

I should note that BADG appears in a third edition. I don't own a copy. I know someone who does. I should have stopped at his house to consult it. For all I know, Dr. Danker may have spruced this entry up. In his mini-lexicon, the last accomplishment of his long, productive career, he renders the two core definitions of *krateo* as "gain control of" and "have firm hold on." Neither of these supports the notion of sticking somebody with their sins.

Back to Raymond Brown, and his mention of a parallelism between the two clauses of the verse. He uses that to resolve his own question about what's being "held" in Clause Two, the sinner or the sin, and opts for the latter. This supports the standard reading, in which the clauses stand in contrast, sins either being forgiven (Clause One) or not forgiven (Clause Two). In a subsequent extended discussion of the verse (p. 1039ff.), he calls on Matthew's contrast between "binding" and "loosing" (16:19, 18:18) to buttress this further.

But suppose John 20:23 is designed to reflect a different kind of parallelism, the one that abounds in Hebrew poetry? We encounter it weekly in the Psalms. An idea is expressed. The same thought—not a contrasting one—is immediately recast in different words that underscore and amplify it. "The earth is the LORD's, and the fullness thereof; / the world, and they that dwell therein" (Ps. 24:1). Here both clauses say the same thing: "It's all the LORD's." Clause Two underscores that this includes

all human beings, as in (presumably) not just the Yahweh crowd but the folks next door who bend the knee to Baal.

So suppose the same kind of interplay is at work between the clauses of 20:23? Clause One: "If you forgive someone's sins, God forgives them too." Clause Two, repeating, amplifying: "If you hang onto that someone, God hangs on to that someone too." Here, of course, I'm making hay with the opacity and oddity of the Greek's "if you hold them," opting against Brown to see the sinner and not the sin as the object held. Were I somehow able to discuss this with Brown—so sorry, he too is recently with the Lord, and making merry with Fred, I'll bet—I'd want respectfully to point him to his own rule of thumb that the verse be interpreted "in the light of the immediate context and of the major themes of Johannine theology" (1042). Both of these, I'd argue, support the spin I'm applying to it.

Take the immediate context. It is Easter night. Jesus appears from nowhere amid the fear-addled disciples. "Peace be with you." That opens the conversation, and makes it plain that their sins of doubt, denial, and blatant apistia are suddenly a non-issue. He displays his wounds, there is joy in the room—and now he says it again: "Peace be with you." Note the repetition, followed immediately by "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." With that he grabs hold of these sinners. He makes them his agents. And now the empowering, this wondrous breathing of the Holy Spirit that authorizes them to do for others as he has just finished doing for them. That does not include sticking it to sinners. If anything, it means getting stuck on sinners, the way Jesus is stuck on them (cf. 15:12). It's as if verse 23 is saying, "Being sent as I'm sent you've got two related jobs, and the Spirit to pull them off. First job: forgive sins. Second job: hang onto the sinner." Kratein. Grab hold of them. Embrace

them as you would a brother or a sister, and don't let go.

As to Johannine theology as a whole, isn't this what Jesus is doing from beginning to end in the Gospel? Again and again the two great moves: dismiss the sin; glom onto the sinner. Think Nicodemus; the Samaritan woman; the Bethesda invalid; the man born blind. Above all think Peter, who even after Easter night decides with others to slink away and go fishing again. Along comes Jesus to deal with his denial once and for all and after that to hold him tight. Kratein indeed.

Brown for his part uses John's context and theology to defend the older, standard reading. I'll leave it to you to see how he does that. If you don't own the book, it's well worth a trip to the older colleague's house to check it out there. The relevant pages are 1024 and 1039-45. Those who don't know Brown will quickly see what a meticulous scholar he is. They'll also spot how careful he is to honor the church's long-established teaching. One expects nothing less of a faithful Jesuit, and I say that with great respect. One likewise expects the sassy Lutheran to press, prod, and challenge tradition on the grounds of its evangelical fidelity. That's what I'm doing here. I'd like to think that Brown, for his part, would have thoroughly graciously in respecting that.

Some other time I'll press the case that my newfound sense of this verse will stand even if the "them" of Clause Two refers to the sins and not to the sinner. I'll muse as well on what difference it would make in a congregation if we got past the notion that "retaining sins," as in sticking it to sinners, was somehow a facet of our mission. Lutherans remain as convinced of that as anyone, I fear.

But such things have got to wait for later. At 2500+ words I've already exceeded the limit of a reasonable single post. To which



I add, tongue in cheek, though only partly: Forgive the sin.  
Hang onto the sinner. God grant me the faith to return the  
favor, if and when I need to.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce