“But who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked his Apostles. Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus answered, “Blessed are you, Simon bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 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.” (Matthew 16:15-19)

There’s a lot packed into the words of Jesus above. For now, let’s focus on the “keys” that Jesus said he would give the Apostle Peter. What is Jesus talking about here? We all know the tradition that Peter is the gatekeeper of heaven and when we die we must get permission from him to enter into heaven through the Pearly Gates. There’s been many a joke told with that as the premise. Or, the Catholic Church has used this as a proof text to say Peter was the first Pope, and what the Pope says goes.

Let me offer an alternative view. I believe Jesus’ words provide a near-term but very far-reaching perspective on the keys he promised Peter. Go with me to Acts 2. It’s the day of Pentecost as the disciples wait, just as Jesus instructed, until he sends his Spirit. The Spirit arrives like a rushing wind, and speaking in a tongue that all can understand on this festival day, Peter preaches the first resurrection sermon. When he is done telling them what has happened to Jesus, who Jesus really is, they cry out, “What must we do?” And Peter provides the key, telling them “Repent and be baptized ever one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” He thus opened the door of salvation for all these Jews gathered at this Jewish festival.

Fast forward with me to Acts 10. Peter has been focused on his fellow Jews, most likely holding onto his prejudice against the Gentiles (non-Jews). He is in Joppa (not by accident where Jonah fled his mission to the Gentiles) and in a vision comes to understand that God has made clean what was formally considered unclean. Cornelius, a Gentile centurion (Roman soldier) lives in Caesarea and has a vision of his own. He’s told to send for Simon who is called Peter. He does. Peter goes and realizes that God has granted salvation by faith to the Gentiles, saying, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality.” Peter preaches the gospel to those in Cornelius’ house and God’s Spirit impacts them as it did the disciples on Pentecost. Peter provides the key, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

The door of salvation is now open to all; both Jew and Gentile! Peter used the keys Jesus gave him, and what is bound on earth is bound in heaven, what is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven. In other words, to be loosed from your sins, respond in faith, repentance, and baptism, becoming a disciple of Jesus! For those who do, the door to God’s Kingdom swings open, as do the gates of heaven.

**Cross Point**: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded.” Jesus giving his commission to the Apostles that fits perfectly with the keys Peter would soon use. It continues with us!