

LOCKED OUT?

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Grace Church in New York
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Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." John 14:1-2a)

Throughout this past week, as I lived with today's reading from the Gospel of John, I kept remembering a time when I was locked out of my house. I was the new rector of a lovely church in a leafy, close-in suburb of Cincinnati. The position came with an attractive, 19th century rectory across the street from the church. Stacie and I were newly engaged; we were doing the long-distance thing, and she was in town to start planning the wedding. It was a Friday night. I had a sermon to write for Sunday. Thus, with all this on our plates, we did the only responsible thing we could do: we went to the movies – Apollo 13, if I recall.

After the movie we pulled into the driveway, walked up to the door, and suddenly realized that neither one of us could produce the key to open it. For the life of me, I don't remember how the keys to the car and the house became separated, but they did, and we were stuck outside. Every window and door on the first floor was locked tight. What would we do? I thought that a second-floor bathroom window just might be unlocked, so my proposal was to get up there and climb through it. It would be just a short leap from the top of the deck railing. I would go "Mission Impossible." I would cling to the sill with one hand and open the screen and window with the other, then pull myself in.

Stacie thought that my plan was quite idiotic, and if memory serves, a minor argument ensued. So what was her brilliant idea? How about going to the house of the previous rector to ask if he still had a key? You see, my predecessor was a priest named Bob, who, after serving for 25 happy years, had retired to a house just two blocks away. But I most definitely did not want to go begging for Bob's help only three weeks into my tenure. I was eager to prove myself wise beyond my years, and to dispel any notion that the search committee was wrong in calling a young punk like me to be their rector. Besides, Bob still dined with parishioners at the local country club. It would be all over the cocktail circuit that the new rector couldn't keep his keys straight. But what choice did I have? With my pride in check I went to see Bob, who did indeed have a key that he graciously gave me. To this day still I am constantly checking my pockets to make sure I have my keys.

In today's reading from the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke to the disciples about his Father's house, and how to get into it. John 14:1-6 is perhaps one of the most familiar passages in all of the Bible. People often choose these verses to be read at the funerals of family members and friends because in the words, *in my Father's house are many dwelling places*, they hear the wide-open welcome of God's embrace to all sorts and condition of believers. A secret fear in countless Christians is that they or their departed loved ones will find themselves locked outside of heaven. They fear that their particular beliefs about God will be judged incorrect or of insufficient intensity to turn the key. Thus at the time of death they will find no friend, no welcome, and no room in God's heavenly home. But in these words people have heard a different message on the lips of Jesus: the door to the Father's house swings wide, and there is room for everyone inside.

It was only last summer when Stacie and I finally installed an EZ Pass on the dashboard of our car. I'll never forget the first time we approached the toll booth to get onto I-495 on our way

to the beach. Would the arm swing open? It did: magically, and for free! Imagine: after all those years of paying money! Our hope and prayer is that the gates of heaven will open wide so that in we, in fulfillment of the Psalm, can lie down in green pastures.

Not so fast! One beautiful Saturday morning last spring I had just sat down in my office to write a sermon (always a sermon to write), when I saw a young man stumble into the yard and lie down in the green grass. It's not exactly a pasture, but it's the closest thing you'll find to one on Broadway. The man was a wreck. He didn't look homeless, but rather like he'd been out all night boozing and brawling. Apparently, his intention now was to sleep it off on the lawn. Knowing that a bridal party would be arriving later in the morning to take pictures, I went out and told the man that he'd have to move along. He promised he would, but didn't. I finally went out again with Paul and Johnson, two of our maintenance men. When the man still wouldn't move along, Paul said, "Let's call 911." Suddenly the young man's head shot up and he said, "Wait! What?" If memory serves, a minor argument ensued as the man dragged himself to his feet and out the gate. "I thought the church was supposed to welcome everyone," he yelled.

Likewise, if you read on in today's passage from John, you might find yourself quoting the young man: "Wait! What? I thought the church was supposed to welcome everyone." Just four verses on from his promise of many dwelling places, Jesus said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" Suddenly, the wide open door seems narrow, guarded, even locked to some on the outside. The sad truth is, too often people of faith have fancied themselves to be the gatekeepers to heaven, and have invested far too much energy in guarding the door, checking credentials, and making much of that which cannot matter much to God. On the other hand, to suggest that fellowship in the Body of Christ can happen without creeds and commitments is to invite chaos into our midst. It is to destroy our integrity and mission. No cell can exist without a membrane distinguishing between inside and outside. So we cannot not have the conversation about who's in and who's out, but every time we do, arguments ensue – sometimes not so minor.

Today's reading from the Book of Acts (7:55-60) is an example of the worst of what can happen when passionate people argue about who belongs in the house of the Lord, and who does not. Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church, was a man whom Luke describes as "full of grace and power," doing "great signs and wonders among the people." Stephen preached about Jesus in the synagogues, and some of his fellow Jews didn't like it. They fabricated charges against him and brought him before the council. In the run-up to today's reading, Stephen stood before the council and recast all the history of God's dealings with Israel as if the people had locked themselves out of the Father's house again and again, no matter how many times the grace of God opened the door. The killing of Jesus, he declared, was just the latest example in a long legacy of resisting the Holy Spirit. It would be an understatement to say that an argument ensued. The people were enraged, and dragged Stephen to a pit and stoned him. Standing there, consenting to Stephen's death, was a young man named Saul.

I wonder – and I say this in parentheses – but I wonder if our friends at the Diocese noticed that on the day after the diaconal ordinations, when new deacons, including Richard Limato, would be returning to their home churches, the appointed reading would be the stoning of the deacon, Stephen. Oops! If they'd noticed, they might have chosen a different day. Suffice it to say, we pray that Richard's ministry as a deacon will be lengthier and more peaceful than Stephen's. As for us here, I can say that on Friday, in a final proof-reading of the 11 am bulletin, just in the nick of time I caught a similar goof of our own before it could happen. I noticed that the order of service would have the choir stand and sing Handel's *Hallelujah* chorus immediately following the stoning of Stephen. It would have gone like this: "When he had said this, he died." The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. *Hallelujah!*

Well, the choir did sing Hallelujah, but later in the service. They sang it because *Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me."* If I were to paraphrase these words of Jesus into a contemporary expression, it might be: "Relax, I got this." To the question of the Father's house, and how to get into it, Jesus said to his disciples, "Relax, I got this." Part of relaxing might require that we stop forcing these words of Jesus to mean what he never intended. When Jesus said, "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,*" he wasn't turning off the porch light and hiding the keys to the house of the Lord, making it harder for people to enter. I believe just the opposite is true. He was turning on the light and unlocking the door so that you and I and all the world might gain entrance.

In Eastertide we give thanks that Jesus overcame death and the grave, *and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life.* He's opening the door, not guarding the door, not locking the door. And it sure beats trying to leap for a second-story bathroom window, and climbing in through another way. What I take Jesus to be saying is this: "Here is the door. Let me open it for you." For us, to bear witness to Jesus doesn't have to be a competitive thing. Humility is a virtue. Christianity has been said to be nothing more than one beggar telling another where he has found bread. Or try this: it may be one person locked out of a house telling another where to find a key. We believe that Jesus opens the door to God.

Jesus, through Stephen, opened the door to God for that young man named Saul, who was presiding over the brutal deed. Saul was a Pharisee with no lack of confidence in his insider status in the house of the Lord. In his judgement Stephen and all the followers of Jesus were preaching lies to his people, and corrupting the faith of Israel. But Saul was right there when Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." And he was right there when Stephen knelt down and cried with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The example of Stephen's death – so much like the death of Jesus – went to work on Saul, and by his own admission was a key ingredient that led to his own conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus. Stephen saw Jesus, and Saul saw Jesus through Stephen, and then for himself. Jesus opens the door. Jesus opened the door to God for Saul.

I've never traveled to the Holy Land before, but if someday I do, one thing I certainly want to see is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The church is built over the site purported to be the birthplace of Jesus. I'm told that the doorway into the church is only three-feet high, requiring most people to stoop down low or even to kneel in order to gain entrance. The door wasn't built to teach humility. In fact, it was reduced in size to prevent marauders from storming the building on horseback. But today it is called the Door of Humility, and it serves as a poignant reminder that the way into the Father's house is not by our own strength and smarts. It is not by being arrogant, boastful, rude, or rude. It is not by being correct or going "Mission Impossible." It is only by the grace of God. It is only because Jesus opens the door for those of us locked outside. We have found in Jesus that the doorway to God is open, and in humility seek to share such good news with the world.

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