

THE KEYS TO HOME

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Grace Church in New York
Palm Sunday + April 10, 2022

*Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord.
“This is the gate of the Lord; those who are righteous may enter.” (Psalm 118:19-20)*

Throughout this past week, as I have pondered the mysteries of Palm Sunday, and lived with the verses of Psalm 118, I've been remembering a time when I accidentally locked myself out of my house. It was the summer of 1995, and 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 directly across the street. Stacie and I were newly engaged. We were doing the long-distance thing. Stacie had driven down from the Detroit area where we had met to start planning the wedding, which we had decided would be in Cincinnati. It was a Friday night. We had appointments to keep on Saturday. 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. It was a real thriller. Would the brave astronauts get home to Earth? Spoiler alert: they do!

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. Houston, we have a problem. 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. What would we do? Well, we formed a two-person procession of sorts and made our way around the outside of the house, stopping at every window and door in the hope that one might be unlocked. None were. I had two cats at the time and we could see them inside following us from window to window. Their names were Alpha and Omega, and I must say that from A to Z, from beginning to end, they were completely unhelpful. I knew that I had a spare key in my new office across the street, but the church was locked up just as tight as the house. We were on the outside looking in. It was a terrible feeling.

Strangely, that feeling of being locked out of home is deeply embedded in the human psyche. The writer of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, describes the home in which God intended for us to live. Lovely and leafy would be an understatement. It was a garden – the Garden of Eden – paradise. Adam and Eve, the representative man and woman – were to enjoy a perfect relationship with God, with no need for a church across the street because God would dwell in the midst of them. They were to have a perfect relationship with each other, with no need for hiding or shame. They were to have a perfect relationship with the creation, subsisting on all the fruits of the garden, all except one. The terror of life feeding on life wasn't in the plan.

We all know the story. Something goes terribly wrong. Adam and Eve find themselves locked out of the garden. The perfect presence they knew inside is shattered, and now separation, strife, toil, disease, and death are the new reality for them and us. What is more, an angel with a flaming sword guards the door to prevent any reentry. The way is barred. In this regard I think of the scene from the Harry Potter books involving the subway platform 9 ³/₄. Do you remember it? Platform 9 ³/₄ was supposed to be the reliable portal between the material, muggle world and the mystical realm where miraculous things were possible. For muggles like you and me, Platform 9 ³/₄ would be a solid brick wall. But a wizard like Harry Potter could pass right through it. It worked every time, until it didn't. One day an elf named Dobby cast a spell, closed the portal, and Harry went crashing into the cold, hard, stone of the wall. The way to Hogwarts was barred. He was locked out.

So consider Harry Potter. Or consider Thomas Hobbes, the 17th century English philosopher who went so far as to profess and teach that we hit the brick wall because we are not meant for transcendence. The suffering we experience here on the wrong side of Eden is simply the natural state of humanity. Left to our own devices, without the strict supervision of a strong government, warfare is the norm and peace is the exception. What is surprising is not that war breaks out, but that we have intervals of peace between the fighting. Hobbes' thinking is enjoying a renaissance in light of Russia's criminal aggression in Ukraine. He is often famously quoted that the life of humanity is destined to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The way to paradise is barred. Yet at the same time we are haunted by a primal memory of the perfect presence we lost. We are on the outside looking in. How do we open the gates? If we've learned anything during these past two years of pandemic, it is how much easier it was to shut things down than to open them up. It was way easier to lock myself out of the house than it was to get back in. This is why we pray, *Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord.*

Now bring all this bear on Palm Sunday. When Jesus arrived at the gates of Jerusalem it was the culmination of a long, hard climb. The Gospel of Luke reports that it was an extended pilgrimage that had begun in Galilee, wended its way through Jericho – one of the lowest places on the face of the earth – and finally arrived at the city of God set on a hill in time for Passover. Along the way other pilgrims would have joined Jesus and his disciples, and the growing crowd would have chanted the Psalms, which were Hebrew hymns. One in particular that they would have sung is what we know as Psalm 118, a portion of which we recited today. The Psalm is a prayer to be allowed in – to be granted an entrance into God's presence. It is the prayer of all people in all times and places who refuse to believe that our eternal destiny is to be expelled from paradise. Why do we still yearn for the presence of God if our natural state is to be outside of it? Why do we hunger for love and justice if we are not meant for transcendence?

Luke tells us that by the time Jesus and his disciples reached the gate the crowd of pilgrims had grown to a multitude, and they began shouting that Jesus was the king who had come in the name of the Lord. Jesus was the long awaited Messiah who would put all things back the way God intended them to be. Israel would at last enjoy God's unmistakable presence, dwell in peace and security, and live in harmony with the creation. How would the Messiah do it? Most assumed that sooner or later, the Messiah's work would involve thrills and spills, clanging swords and thundering hoof beats, violence and force.

When Stacie and I were locked out of the house in Cincinnati, I began to conclude that some act of force was going to be necessary. I would have to kick down a door or break a pane of glass. Thus I reasoned with myself. Then I spied that a second-floor bathroom window was actually open a few inches. All that I had to do was to get up there and climb through it. How would I do it? Well, Harry Potter used a flying car to get to Hogwarts. But since a flying car was not an option for me, I would brave what seemed to be just a short leap from the top of the deck railing to the window. Parkour wasn't yet an official thing, so I would be the trailblazer. I would get a running start and spring to the window. I would cling to the sill with one hand, open the screen and window with the other, then pull myself inside. Stacie, wisely, talked me out of every harebrained scheme, and I am grateful for it.

Finally, it occurred to us that I might simply go to the house of the previous rector and ask if he still had a key. You see, my predecessor was a saintly old priest named Bob, who after serving for 25 happy years, had retired to a house just two blocks away. I was reluctant. It would be a slice of humble pie for the new rector who was eager to prove himself. But what was I going to do? What choice did I have? With my pride in check, this humble beast pursued the road to Bob's house. Guess what: Bob did indeed have a key that he graciously gave me. *Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks ... to Bob.*

Likewise, Jesus has the key. Everything that Jesus did on the first Palm Sunday and throughout the week to come suggests that he had the keys to home. Consider the donkey. The Gospel of Luke details Jesus' painstaking plans through an inside friend to procure just the proper donkey to ride into the city. Why? Because the prophet Zechariah (9:9) had foretold that it was a key: the true king would enter Jerusalem riding a humble beast. Consider the arranging of the upper room where Jesus and his disciples would eat the Passover meal. Can you imagine trying to find a room in Jerusalem at Passover time? Jesus found one, again because he had made plans well in advance with someone he knew. The Passover meal was a key – a key to linking what he was about to do with the great story God had been telling through Israel. Consider that Jesus knew beforehand that Judas would betray him. How did he know? Not by magical, mystical powers. He knew because his people had informed him. Jesus was one step ahead of them all. Jesus had the keys, and within a few days would be deep in heart of Jerusalem's corridors of power: face-to-face with Pontius Pilate, Herod the Tetrarch, and Caiaphas the High Priest.

But neither the governor's mansion, nor the imperial palace, nor the sacred confines of the Temple were the houses that Jesus intended to enter. Rather, his destination was the heart of God. His mission was paradise restored. His passion was to open the gates of righteousness and return us all to the presence of God. But how would unrighteous people fit through the gate of righteousness? The final key to the house of the Lord would be the cross. Jesus had concluded that his calling was to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption. Liturgical theologians have tried to describe the mystery. Thomas Cranmer would write that on the cross, Jesus *“made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.”* Or another familiar rendition, also from our prayer book: Jesus *“stretched out his arms upon the cross and offered himself in obedience to [God's] will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.”*

Either way, the cross is the key – the key to getting us back home. But where had Jesus found this key? Centuries before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah (53) had foretold the mystery. Isaiah spoke of a figure commonly called the Suffering Servant, who would bear our griefs, and carry our sorrows. The Suffering Servant would be despised, rejected, and killed. But by his wounds and stripes the unrighteous would be healed. The unrighteous would be allowed to enter the gate of the Lord. The unrighteous would become worthy to stand before God. Jesus knew the Scriptures well, and based his understanding of himself on Isaiah's Suffering Servant. The agonizing conclusion that he reached was that he of all people was the One sent from God to fulfill the ancient prophesies. To be a Christian – to be a follower of Jesus – can begin the day you agree with him. “You are the one, Jesus, who has done for me what I cannot do for myself.” I am completely unhelpful at saving myself, so today we pray, *“Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord.”*

I've been thinking this week that Palm Sunday is much like the church season of Advent. Both are about the coming of the Lord. In Advent we sing a hymn with words we could sing today:

O come, thou Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Hosanna! Hosanna!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!