



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 3, 2020
ACTS 2:42-47; PSALM 23; 1 PETER 2:19-25; JOHN 10:1-10

GATED COMMUNITY



There is a surprising amount of treasure hidden in our back yard. I'm not talking about the kind that requires a metal detector. To discover this treasure, you only need a weed-eater. Last weekend, I unearthed two perfectly good garden hoses and a 15-year old sprinkler. Even though they had been buried for years under a thicket of ivy, they still work like new.

There was another surprise, too: an old gate. I admit, it is hard to lose a gate, even in a

messy yard. This was no ordinary fence, though. Instead, it was one of daughter's old doll toys. For a time, that gate and the animals that went with it were some of her favorite toys. Finding that gate was like finding was something from another era of life, from a time we have outgrown as a family. ...and yet, there is was, this toy gate, ready to teach new lessons to anyone curious enough to notice it.

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on this day, we hear some part of the 10th

chapter of John's gospel. The post-resurrection stories from the past few weeks give way to images of shepherds, sheep, and yes, gates. Good Shepherd Sunday also signals a noticeable shift in the Easter narrative. What began with personal encounters of the risen Christ now turn to implications of the resurrection for the whole community.

Jesus meets us today as a pastor. Like a skilled shepherd, he embraces us as we are and encourages us to keep trying. This year, we really need that tender care. With each successive day, the likelihood of a quick resolution to the COVID pandemic fades. Whether we like it or not, we have to make peace with the fact we are in this for the long haul.

Like he did with the earliest Church, Jesus meets us in a mixed-up time. We aren't sure what is happening or where we are headed. All we know is that everything is changing. We can feel it deep within our bones. God's up to something, but what is it?

Last week, I realized that for me, part of that answer involves this space, this nave that connects us all together. So many of you have asked what it is like to be here now. Many of you wonder if it feels as empty in person as it looks on camera. The answer to that question is evolving.

I will confess that on Maundy Thursday, it was hard to be here. That day, my own grief peaked, and I mourned not being able to be with you in person. That night, I shared that the nave felt like an empty tomb ready to receive the broken body of Jesus.

Since the Easter Vigil, that has started to shift. Yes, the nave is mostly empty, and it will be that way for a while longer. But the emptiness of Holy Week is giving way to a spaciousness. Grief is changing into curiosity. Uncertainty is transforming into possibility. Now, it feels like God is up to something here, just like God is up to something where you are. Somehow, God is transforming the empty places of our lives into something new.

In his book *Community: the Structure of Belonging*, Peter Block talks about problem solving and possibility. Problem solving involves fixing the past and sustaining what already is. Possibility, on the other hand, looks forward and focuses on what is new. Possibility creates a future we want to inhabit. It is a world we choose to live into. That kind of future is a statement of who we are at our essence. It transcends history, story, and the usual people we are around. For Block, "the

power of possibility is in the act of declaring.”¹

This, I think, is what God is up to in the resurrection. The resurrection is God’s declaration, God’s emphatic yes to us, that God wants to inhabit a world with us in it. But the world that God longs to live in with us is not one that existed before COVID-19, nor is it our world today.

Resurrection is not resuscitation. It is not a return to the old ways of living, moving, or having our being. God is much more interested in dreaming with us rather than fixing our problems for us. God longs for us to find new ways of living, ones that move beyond basic existence and focus instead on fulfilment. Those ways of life are bound up with God. They transcend mortal bodies and find meaning beyond the grave. They are generative, inclusive, never-ending, and unbounded. I would argue that’s the definition of abundant life.

Jesus tells us that he is the gate, not because he wants to let some people in while excluding others. Nor does Jesus tell us he is the gate to keep us guessing which side of the gate we belong. That’s not how God’s gated community works. God doesn’t restrict the kingdom nor does God meter out God’s love to anyone. Instead, Jesus challenges us to look

at the barriers around and within us. Then, like that old toy gate in my yard, he asks us to let go of what we’ve outgrown.

In the last few weeks, what have you given up that you don’t miss? What would it take for you to keep up that fast? Who in the community are you most concerned about? What is one thing you can do with them to show your concern and to bring about fuller life for both of you? How you answer those questions reveals how resurrection can happen now. Those are the ways God is calling you us to engage with the rest of us right now. That’s how a new world comes into being, one that God longs to inhabit with you, and me, and all people.

The earliest followers of Jesus were like us. For a time, there were lost in the fog of their own disbelief and grief. Eventually, they regained their footing, adapted to a new reality, and found a way forward.

What they did not do was to return to the old ways of the past. I’m sure it was tempting. It certainly is for us. Instead, those early followers trusted what they knew deep in their bones: that God had bigger plans for them.

While they couldn’t know the full extent of God’s vision, they did know enough to get

¹This paragraph is taken from the ideas of Peter Block as reflected in his book about community and belonging. See Peter Block,

Community: The Structure of Belonging 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2018), 131.

started. They studied the teachings of the disciples. They gathered as a community and cared for each other like family. They ate together, and they prayed to God. That's how their resurrected life began. That's how ours does, too. That's what we promise in baptism. Those same practices will help us discern what God is up to now with us.

When the Israelites languished in Babylon, God did not abandon them. Instead, God encouraged them with one of the most hopeful promises in all of scripture: "I, the

Lord your God, am about to do something new. Do you not perceive it?"² God is always up to something new. Resurrection is always unfolding. God is always breaking down the barriers of this world and transforming them into a future filled with abundant life. God is acting right now. Do you perceive it?

² See Isaiah 43:19

John 10:1-10: *[Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."]*

