

Easter 2 (A)
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Text: John 10:1-10

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I've been hearing the question a lot. When will the virus subside? When will things return to normal? There were some mildly encouraging signs this week. The governor opened the way for hospitals and clinics and dental offices to resume non-emergency procedures. So if you were waiting for a post-surgery check-up with the doctor, or waiting for knee surgery, maybe this is really good news for you. But for everything else, we're still waiting—for a meal out at a restaurant, for seeing a new movie on the big screen, going to a Timbers game. It's not time yet. We're still wearing masks when we go to the grocery store. We're still maintaining our six feet of social distancing when we go for a walk. The only kind of happy hour we're enjoying is the virtual kind. We're really still a long ways from normal, and the journey to get there may very well be filled with starts and stops and retrenchments. I'm convinced that the road back to normal is going to be a very long one, and because of the economic impacts of the pandemic, the "normal" we arrive at in (perhaps) another 12 to 18 months isn't going to be the same as the normal we left behind in mid-March.

That's why, for me, instead of asking when we'll get back to normal, I'm more interested in exploring what sort of normal we want to live in when the virus subsides. And I wonder whether during this time when all our ordinary routines have been disrupted, I wonder whether we're beginning to see some things more clearly. We're learning in our bones what is most important in life—things like simple human connections, things like compassion and inclusive community and responding to the needs of neighbors. Maybe we're also seeing more clearly that when we emerge on the other side of this pandemic, there are things we want to change. We've begun to see the unjust impact of longstanding racist attitudes and policies in our country, and we want there to be greater justice and equity. We've recognized how hard life can be for people who are immigrants or homeless or gender-nonconforming, and we don't want anyone to be scapegoated or shunned or invisible. We really long for there to be a new normal when we come out on the other side of this time of disruption and trouble and worry.

I'm hopeful because I believe God's Spirit is always at work for healing and connection and justice in the human family. I'm also hopeful because, as we begin to really recognize what is most important, as we begin to see things more clearly, we can make different choices together, choices for justice and equity and inclusion. And our gospel story for today helps me put words to that hope. I'd like to explore with you three things that Jesus says that can guide us toward making the most of this time of crisis and letting it be for us a productive time when we lay hold of the heart of our faith in a way that can yield blessing for us and blessing for our future. First, Jesus says he is the gate for the sheep. Second, he says that anyone who enters by him will be saved. And third, Jesus opens the way to abundant life. So: (1) gate, (2) saved, (3) abundant life.

First, then, Jesus says: "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." Now, he was speaking to a controversy that had erupted after he had given sight to a man born blind. You might think

everyone would recognize a healing like this as an incredible gift from God. But, it happened on a Sabbath. And the religious authorities had so narrowly limited how they understood God's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy that there was no room for putting God's love into practice on the Sabbath. They concluded that Jesus was a Law-breaker and that Jesus' compassionate act could not have come from God. For the authorities, faith functioned as a wall to keep out everything bad—bad influences, bad practices, bad people. But that's not how Jesus sees God or faith. A gate is an entry point, a place of opening. And Jesus identifies himself as the one who opens the way for people to experience the blessing of life with God, with all of God's people and God's beloved creation. Jesus is the one who opens the way to a new future, a future we could never have created for ourselves, but can only experience as the result of God's Spirit working in our lives. Jesus is the gate.

Second, Jesus says: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." For the blind man, the salvation he received from Jesus meant he was set free from living his whole life in the dark, isolated and marginalized. No longer would he sit and beg, wondering whether anyone would toss him a coin so he would have something to eat that day. Jesus gave him his life—a whole life. And in this time of pandemic, I wonder what sort of salvation you think we need most. My answer would be that we need to be saved from the anxiety and fear and worry that make our lives small. We need to be saved from selfishness and an angry sense of entitlement. We need to be saved from injustice and apathy. And Jesus is the gate to that kind of salvation. Jesus embodies a way of love and freedom. He shows us the beauty and power of compassion and forgiveness, of humility and generosity and inclusive community. And for us to enter the gate that is Jesus is to put these basic practices at the center of our lives, to follow his way of love so that we enter a new life, a saved life. Whoever enters by Jesus will be saved.

And third, Jesus says: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Abundant life isn't just "OK life." Abundant life is Jesus' way of freedom and peace and joy. Abundant life means having a sense of belonging and purpose and hope. Abundant life grows out of living with compassion and forgiveness, with humility and generosity. Abundant life is all about creating connection and community and belonging, so that the blessings of life can flow through us to all of God's children. Jesus gives abundant life.

Through the words of scripture, Jesus is speaking today to us. He is the gate. Whoever enters by him will be saved. He gives abundant life. And what I'm hearing from Jesus this morning is that if we want to enter into a future full of freedom and peace, shaped by justice and compassion and forgiveness—then we'll need to enter that future by way of Jesus. And here's how we enter by way of Jesus. No matter what guilt or shame we carry with us, we receive Jesus' assurance of complete forgiveness that sets us free, and we begin to learn how to live with forgiveness for others. No matter how worried or anxious we might feel, we receive Jesus' promise that nothing has the power to separate us from God's love, and we begin to live with a little more freedom, a little less tightness, a little more boldness. No matter how overloaded we might feel, we receive Jesus' gift of compassion, to know that our lives matter to God and we are held securely forever in God's compassionate care, and we then begin to be able to see others with

eyes of compassion. To enter through Jesus is to enter his way of forgiveness and love and compassion, and discover that way is the future we long for with all our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.