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 4 Easter A: John 10:1-10
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 The Open Door

In one of the parishes Joe and I belonged to in Pennsylvania, the door to the church was never locked. It was a small old church building, and like St. Anne's, separate from the building where the parish offices were. In the church building, all the valuables were kept secure, but the doors were never locked. This fact was not widely advertized, but the church leadership thought it was important that people can go into the church whenever they need to.

One day I was sitting with the Rector of that church in her office when someone came in and asked to see the inside of the church. "It's a lovely building. I looked in the windows, and it looks so pretty, and I was just wondering if I could go in to pray."

"Did you try the door?" asked the Rector.

"The door?" came the puzzled reply. "Of course not. I just assumed it was locked."

In many places that's a safe assumption. We lock this building up at night, but one of the things that I treasure about this place is that we do keep it open most of the day, most every day. I really liked that in that small parish church in Pennsylvania, the rector could answer, "Oh, the door is open when you need a place to go. Try the door."

In today's gospel lesson we hear Jesus say of himself, "I am the gate of the sheepfold." The gate is the door. Jesus is the door to the home of the sheep. This is the beginning of the passage where Jesus goes on to describe himself with what may be his most beloved image of all: the good shepherd.

But in today's section, he describes himself as a door, the door the sheep must pass through.

What does it mean that Jesus describes himself as a door? And why is he talking about doors anyway?

Jesus' description of himself in today's gospel is a response to what happened in the chapter right before. On a Sabbath day, Jesus had healed a man blind from birth. And in response to that healing, the gatekeepers of the man's religious community have cast him out. They have kicked the healed man out and told him he no longer belongs. He no longer has a place to go. Where do you go when you've been cast out? Where do you go when you no longer belong?

"I am the gate." I am the door, says Jesus. Come in. When you need a place to go, I am the door. Jesus is God coming into the world to open the door to God's kingdom.

The image Jesus uses comes from one aspect of how good shepherds tend their sheep. I've read how shepherds in the middle east still follow many of the same practices they would have in Jesus' day. The sheepfold is a small enclosure, fenced in, but with a small opening. When the sheep are led home after their grazing, back to the sheepfold, the shepherd stands in the opening, legs straddling the doorway. Each sheep must pass by the shepherd. As they go past, the shepherd lovingly inspects each sheep, looking closely to see what each sheep needs. Where is the sheep wounded? Are there burrs stuck in its wool? Does it have sore spots that need tending? What salve might be rubbed in to heal the tender places?

And then, when all the sheep are safely inside the fold, the shepherd lies down in front of the opening, and becomes the door. The shepherd is the door, keeping the sheep safely inside. The shepherd is the door that anyone who wishes to harm the sheep must pass by first.

When you need a place to go, I am the door, says Jesus. And as it is with sheep and their shepherd-door, so it is with us and Jesus. The shepherd isn't looking for credentials and qualifications when his sheep come through the door. The shepherd is not checking i.d.'s. The shepherd is tending to each sheep's needs, each sheep's wounds and scratches that come from daily life, from being hounded by wolves and stuck in bramble bushes. The

shepherd is removing accumulated junk that gets stuck in a sheep's wool, that weighs the sheep down. The shepherd does not ask whether the sheep is deserving of care. The shepherd says, you are mine. This is where you belong. I am the door. Come in.

We all need a place to go, a place to belong.

In his book, *Where do You Go to Give Up? Building a Community of Grace*, Welton Gaddy tells the story of a New York bus driver who ran away with his bus. For years he had driven the same bus down the same streets and made the same stops in the same places at the same times to pick up many of the same passengers. One day, he just couldn't do it anymore. He steered his bus out of the parking lot and started on his route, but he didn't make any of the stops. He just kept driving. He drove through the city and out of the city and away from the city. He just drove away from everything and everybody he knew. The authorities finally found the man and his bus in Florida. When he was brought to trial for his criminal behavior, an avalanche of letters came to the court. The writers pleaded for leniency, explaining they understood the kind of boredom and emptiness that led the bus driver to do what he had done. Many people wrote to say they wished they had the courage to do the same thing. Maybe you know how he felt. Have you ever daydreamed about just running away? Just having a new place to go?

When we feel empty, we need a place to go. We know the disappointment and stress that come from taking care of what needs taking care of. We know how the thrill of being a new parent leads to the baby-related chores that must be repeated day in and day out. How a praiseworthy decision to care for an ailing parent can lead to a feeling of being trapped. How a job that seems to offer new possibilities and fulfillment becomes just a way to pay the bills. We need a place to go to find meaning in the every day.

We need a place to go when tragedy strikes. When the doctor says the word "cancer." When the tests come back positive. When one more war is breaking out or escalating. When one more horrible and unthinkable act of violence is committed, and we wonder where it will happen next and we fear we don't know how to stop it. We need a place to go for comfort and direction and hope.

We need a place to go when we've done something wrong. A small lie threatens to poison everything. A careless word comes back to haunt us. A betrayal hurts someone we love. We fail to take action or make changes and we don't know what to do next. We wish our mistakes would just go away, but they keep showing up to remind us we're not the people we should be or wish we were or pretend to be. We need a place to go for forgiveness.

We need a place to go when we're been wronged. When we've been cast out or pushed aside or wounded. We need a place to go to belong, to be healed.

A theme in the Peanuts comic strip was Charlie Brown's desire to kick the football his friend Lucy holds for him. He charges at it, and she always yanks it away at the last second, leaving Charlie Brown lying on his back. In one of the cartoons, Charlie Brown finally decides he's had enough. In the last frame he asks, "Where do you go to give up?"

In a way, the sheepfold is the place we go to give up, to give everything up to Jesus. The church, the place where the shepherd's sheep are gathered, began with broken-hearted failures who wanted to give up and longed for a place to belong, a place to go. The community that gathers around Jesus is still the place to go. Jesus tells us, I am the door. Come in. Try the door. Jesus says, "Whoever enters by me . . . will come in and go out." Jesus promises freedom. Going through the door may be an exit – a chance to leave some burdens behind. A chance to leave behind our failures, our regrets, our sorrows and pain. The door that is Jesus allows us to come in and be healed so we can go out, to love and serve, freely using the gifts God gave us, freely being the gifts to one another and the world God made us to be.

Try the door. Some of us may be busy peering in the windows, when the door is unlocked and all we need to do is come in where the shepherd stands ready to greet us and bring us in, and give us the healing and comfort and forgiveness we need.

Try the door. The door stands open for you.

Amen.