

5th Sunday after Easter (C)
Acts 11:1-8; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church, Toano, VA
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Four years ago, I spent six months as a chaplain intern at one of North Carolina's publicly run psychiatric hospitals. On my first day of orientation, I was told two important things. First, every door in the building must remain locked at all times. Even the doors to the restrooms. If I wanted to get anywhere in the building, I needed to have a set of keys. With that, I was told to attach the keys I would soon receive to the ID badge around my neck. Second, always wear your ID badge. Without it, I might be mistaken for a patient. And with my keys and ID badge, I, and the rest of the staff, were set apart from those we served.

Despite being "set apart," on that first day I really had no idea what I really was supposed to be doing, but I was eager to find it out. So, I headed to the Canteen, the local break area for the hospital's patients. As I waked into the room, I tried to scope out someone to talk to, but my initial attempts were rebuffed, and I soon felt defeated. *This was going to be a long six months*, I mused to myself.

But just as I was fretting, a burly man, about six feet tall, with clothes that were too small, and hair that looked as though it hadn't seen a comb in months walked up to me. Although his feet shuffled on the ground when he walked, he had the air of someone who was in charge. And I would quickly come to learn that according to him and other patients, he was in fact in charge. Not by virtue of knowledge, but simply because he had been a patient here off and on for 32 years. When he sat down, this towering man, whom we will call Lucas, told me that he had

invented the Internet, owned Comcast Cable, had 49 daughters. I was his fiftieth. Lucas and I soon became fast friends. Everyday I would eat my lunch in the Canteen, talking to him and the other patients. Lucas would often chastise me for eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, telling me that I was eating food for the birds. He also told me that I should acquire a useful trade, like fixing cars or performing X-rays. I would laugh and dismiss his advice, but he was serious. I soon came to enjoy my time with Lucas and the other patients, for their struggles revealed to me more about the sting of loneliness and abandonment than anything else. They also proved just how precious and fragile life is...and how even in suffering, there is grace. Lucas, who suffered from schizoaffective disorder, could count on one hand, the number of times family came to visit them, so he made the other patients and staff his family. But when the bell would ring, signaling that it was time for Lucas and everyone else to head back to their individual wards, I would find myself alone, reminded that as much as Lucas tried to make me and everyone else his family, I was different. He was a patient. I was a chaplain. He had no keys. I had keys. He, and the other patients, had no control over their coming and goings. I, on the other hand, had keys and could come and go as I pleased. On the looks of it, I was in charge. And after long days, when the suffering and pain of witnessing mental illness overwhelmed me and left me angry and confused, I would mindlessly clutch my keys, for with those keys I knew I could leave. I could go home. The keys reminded me that as much as I loved working there, I didn't belong there, not as a patient at least. Those keys were part of my identity as a chaplain, as an employee, as someone who, along with everyone else who worked there, came armored with the delusion that I was different.

As shortsighted as my vision was, I can't help but wonder if Peter, one of the first apostles, found a measure of security in his identity and his right to have the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. You see, during his years of ministry, before he was to be crucified, Jesus had told Peter, that he would be the rock upon which the church would be built, that he would be given the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Despite denying Jesus three times, despite feeling that there was no turning back from his failures, God had already planned for Peter to have a special place, a special purpose. What a great feeling it must have been to know that after failing, after making a fool of himself, God was not done with Peter.

There was just one little problem. Peter had gotten used to preaching the Gospel message only to Jews, to people like him, that he nearly missed the new work God was doing in the early days of the Church. Sure, there had been a few little bumps in the road, okay some major hurdles, like threats and jail, but for the most part, Peter and the apostles had gotten comfortable in the midst of this humdrum of routine, of familiarity, of doing God's great work.

But as Acts tells us, God decided to break God's own rules. It all begins with a dream, a vision really that God gives to Peter, which we heard about moments ago. In this dream, Peter is confronted with this ghastly image of giant beasts and powerful birds. God then tells him to eat those animals. Peter is aghast! He replies, "Oh, not me. Oh God, no, no no. That's not how it goes. We don't eat those unclean things. Not us. No sir we. We are good Jews. We follow the rules. That's how we honor you." Peter doesn't get it, so God says it two more times, "No Peter, kill and eat."

I imagine that at this point, Peter is scratching his head. “What in the world is God telling me now, and how in the world will I tell this to the rest of the apostles?” It’s in this confusion where we find Peter in our lesson this morning. As Peter tried to explain this vision to his apostles, they stand in disbelief.

Perhaps, the boy has gone crazy?? Perhaps, we need a new leader, they wondered. And I’m sure Peter was thinking, “Umm, hello, God, didn’t you put me in charge? Didn’t you give me the keys?” Why are you changing the game plan? And then stubborn old Peter, passionate and dedicated Peter, selfless Peter, good Peter, God’s leader Peter, *that* Peter, gets it. God may have given Peter the keys to church, but it’s still God’s church. God may have given Peter a message of liberation to share to a world shrouded in its selfish ways, but it was God’s message. It was then. And it still is today. God is in the business of redeeming the whole creation, and who was he, as Peter came to realize, to hinder God’s work? God will do whatever it takes to bring reconciliation and wholeness to every part of God’s creation, including you and me...even if it means breaking the rules.

Of course, looking back it is easy to criticize Peter and the apostles for being so close-minded, for thinking they had it all figured out. But you know, we can be just like them. We don’t want to let go of control of our little keys to happiness, because surely we know best. I imagine our stubbornness is the same stubbornness that Peter, the apostles and new followers of Jesus were feeling in those early days of the church’s ministry. They had functioned in a world with neat boundaries and lines of demarcation. It helped keep them feeling safe and good.

But then God gives Peter a dream, a vision. And everything changes. *And I mean everything.*

Might God be trying to work a new thing, a better thing in our lives, but we are so gosh darn afraid that it will hurt, that it won't be familiar, that we may be unloved? It may not come in a vision like it did for Peter, but might we be holding on to outdated expectation and rules? Might we know all of the prayers and Scripture lessons but not think they can radically change our own lives?

But no matter how much we *think* we know, we must be open to the surprise of God resurrecting our lives. For the God we read about in Scripture today is a God who is willing to sacrifice his own flesh and blood, to make the unclean clean, so we may know that life does not have to be a zero-sum game of winners and losers, but a life lived in the presence of a rich and glorious Creation, a life of surprises, a life in which we are all one, not competitors or enemies. Might it be time for us to turn in our "special keys?"

By the time my last day at the hospital rolled around, I found myself saddened at the thought of saying goodbye. It had been a tough six months, but also one of the richest. On the first day, we had all been told that our keys and ID badges would distinguish us from the rest. We were to hold on to them as though our lives depended on it. We were in. They were out. At least that was what everyone told us.

But then came Good Friday, For once, instead of the usual rows of seats, with staff on one side and patients on the other, we gathered in a circle as one for worship. By the time of our closing

hymn, the mood had change. The facades had faded away. And together, we sang, “Where you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes, it causes me to tremble. Tremble. Tremble.” As I looked up, I saw patients who normally walked in a medicine-induced stupor and nurses and social workers who were often overworked and underappreciated wiping the tears that welled in their eyes. It left me speechless. Here we were, in a cinder-block hospital, in a place that had strict boundaries of who belonged and who didn’t, a place where as patients and staff we had forgotten how to find joy and the surprise of God. But we were all trembling. And it hit me like nothing else before.

We are all the same. We all thirst. We all need someone to hear us. We all yearn to know we belong. And we’re determined to get there. Some are behind locked up doors, forced to numb their pain with regular doses of medication—just as their mental illness hides them from the world. And there were the rest of us—the ones with keys—just doing our “jobs” thinking God couldn’t surprise us and do a new thing in our lives. But underneath all of that, sustaining all of that was the reality that we were trying to get home and hear, “Welcome. You belong.”

That day, amidst the pain and sorrow, you could hear the whisper of God inviting us all in.

Today, if you listen closely, you will hear it, too.