

The Rev. Erin Hensley
Easter 4A
John 10:9-10

The Way to Abundant Life

When I visited Virginia Theological Seminary in 2003, I stayed with friends in an apartment within walking distance from the seminary. The way from school to my friends' home in Braddock Lee Apartments seemed simple enough. Walk past the library, through the campus of Episcopal High School. After exiting the campus, cross the street, go to the end of the block and make a right. After the interview in the morning and then lunch, I headed to the apartment. On the way past the library, I waved to an international student who I had met earlier that morning. There was quite a bit of construction on Episcopal High School's campus and I ended up going out the wrong exit of Episcopal High School-no one told me that there were two. I walked around a huge city block to get to the right place. The next day at breakfast I told my new international student friend about my very long journey home. He looked at me and said "Oh, Erin, if only you would have told me, I would have shown you the way."

We're all trying to find our way to God, to that life that has meaning and joy. We are trying to find balance in our lives. And when life is especially hard, we yearn for rest or ease. More often than not, when it rains, it pours. Someone you love has died, the kids have the flu, and work is extremely busy. The car needs new tires, the parents need some help, and a friend's cancer has returned.

Amidst such hard times we often regret past decisions or dream of better times. We say to ourselves "if only I could have done more. If only he would have called me so I could help. If only I could get my daughter to understand. If only I could be more like him. If only I could have more balance in my life." We believe that if this one thing happens we will find that peaceful life in verdant pastures. When we focus on what was or what could be, we cannot clearly see and appreciate what is. And we end up feeling more tired and out of control. All the "if only's" in the world will not get us where we want to be.

Balance is an illusion. We know this from experience. As soon as we have the "perfect schedule" figured out, something new happens. Each season of our lives calls for something different. There is a unique person or situation that needs more attention than others. Life continues to change and such change is easier if we move with it. And control of others is an illusion, too. We can only control ourselves and that in itself is hard work.

What is true, what is no illusion, is that Jesus Christ is the gate, the way that to the lives we seek with and in God. What is true is Jesus not only draws us to himself, but also sends us out. What is true is that Jesus' offering of himself is for life and life abundant.

Jesus says "I am the gate." He is the door through which we enter, the way through which we know God and God's love for God's world. How Jesus lived his life-how he went

about his relationship with God, friends, enemies, strangers, how he listened to and acted on God's call for his particular life-is the way in which we connect with God. Our knowledge of God and Jesus is not dependent on a balanced life, a pristine past, or a future with prospects. Jesus' relationship with his Father and with God's world is what makes him the Way, not anything we've done, left undone or can do. Jesus, the Son, is our "access point" to God the Father. His nature as the gate is not to keep people out but to lay his life down for the sheep. There's no "if only" that will change what God has already done in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord.

And this Lord, this Good Shepherd, this gate is one in which we "come in and go out." In other words, knowing God the Father through Jesus the Son is not simply a one-way trip. Traveling the way of Jesus means moving. Means conversion. Traveling through the gate of Jesus the Christ means we shall be changed and this world will be, too. The sheep move through and with Christ to find provision and sustenance and yes, even some rest for the sheep. We enter through the gate, but we do not stay in a small protected sheepfold. We enter through the gate to go out again.

And when we go out, we go out not just to survive. We go out to thrive. For Jesus Christ came so that all could have life abundantly. It's important to note that there is no explicit mention here of the afterlife. Abundant life is possible in the here and the now. And that abundant life is not about being financially wealthy, well known or even well respected. Abundant life is that life that is beyond measure, life that abides compassion and the hope of the resurrection, not indifference and destruction.

Peter Gomes says it best in one of his sermons, "Life begins when you see life not simply as an unexpended bit of time, a balance remaining in your savings account with dangers, chances, and fate all taking their part. Life begins when you realize that by removing the fear of death, Christ has given you, for the first time, full possession of your own life. (Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, p.76.) Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. We need not fear death any longer. This life you have is really yours. And this life is really mine. There will never be another life like yours. So claim that life. Do not wait for the "if only" to come true. Find pasture for the sheep, including yourself, with God's help. Gather with other members of the flock to be with Jesus and discern what God would have you do. You do not have to travel alone. In Christ, God has shown us the way. *Amen.*