

Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:1-10

I Am the Gate^{*}

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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When you arrived at Transfiguration this morning, chances are that you walked right through the entrance gate and into the garden. Or perhaps you exchanged a few words there with Fr. John David as you came into the parish. Most of you have probably entered that gate and turned left so many times on a Sunday morning that you no longer notice that it's there.

Known as a “lychgate,” our covered gate is a rarity amongst Manhattan churches. However, the lychgate is a common architectural feature of English countryside churches. What most people don't realize is that, historically speaking, it served an important liturgical purpose. It was more than just a place to put a statue of Jesus or to shelter a passerby temporarily from an unexpected storm.

In medieval times, the lychgate was the place where funerals always began. The gate was the place where the body of the deceased was placed – covered only in a shroud – before it began its final journey into the church and back to God. In fact, the “lych” in lychgate comes from the Old English word for corpse.

Now most of you know the famous story about how our parish got its nickname as the Little Church Around the Corner. Our first rector, Father Houghton, had agreed to hold the funeral of an actor, George Holland, here after a nearby Episcopal church, the Church of the Atonement, refused to do so.

“There might be a little church around the corner that can help,” said the rector of Atonement, referring to Transfiguration. “If this be so, then God bless the little church around the corner!” exclaimed George Holland's friend when he learned about our parish. And the name stuck.

You probably didn't know this, but the lychgate actually plays an important part of this foundational story. There is a stained glass window at the back of the church – it's right there where the south wall turns the corner – that commemorates George Holland's funeral, and it features the lychgate quite prominently.

If you look at the stained glass window after mass, you'll see that the deceased actor is covered in a burial shroud and is propped up by his friend. Both are standing right next to the lychgate. If you weren't aware of the traditional function of the

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lychgate, however, you might be wondering why there is a corpse in a shroud on the sidewalk right outside of the church.

More significantly, however, the stained glass window shows Jesus standing right in front of the lychgate, ready to receive the deceased actor into the church. In fact, Jesus is so prominent in the image that he becomes the gate himself. You can see his radiance and light shining through the lychgate. Indeed, Jesus literally is the gate to eternal life.

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and it is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday. This is because, according to longstanding tradition, the gospel for this Sunday is taken from the tenth chapter of the fourth gospel, which is about Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

In fact, the most common image of Jesus in the early church – often found in catacombs and other burial sites – was that of the Good Shepherd, who is depicted as carrying a lamb over his shoulders.

The prominence of the Good Shepherd image in the early church is not surprising because God and God's appointed leaders were symbolized by the shepherd in ancient Israel. We hear this today the famous Psalm 23, which starts with "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." Moses was a shepherd. David was a shepherd. And that's why, of course, Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd finds a green pasture for us where we might safely graze. In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear about the early church and how it met in safe spaces such as house churches – a pasture of sorts – in order to engage in fellowship, to break bread together, and to praise God.

And when we go "astray like sheep," as mentioned in today's epistle reading from the First Letter of Peter, the Good Shepherd is the "guardian of [our] souls" who brings us back, carrying us tenderly on his shoulders.

What's somewhat odd, however, is the fact that today's gospel reading focuses not only on Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but on Jesus as the gate. "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep . . . I am the gate." But why the gate? It's fairly easy to understand why Jesus is seen as the good shepherd. But why does he suddenly morph into a gate?

The answer lies in understanding the practices of shepherds in ancient Israel. Sometimes, when a shepherd had to take his flock to a far-away pasture in order to graze on grass, it was too late to return back to the village before sunset.

As a result, the shepherd and his flock would have to spend the night outdoors and away from the safety of the village. In those instances, the shepherd would find a cave or other rock formation with an opening and keep his flock inside.

However, because there was no gate to the entrance, the shepherd became the gate itself. The shepherd would lie down across the entrance in order to keep out wolves, thieves, bandits, and other dangers that could harm his flock. The shepherd became the gate.

The function of a gate, however, is not just to keep dangers out. It is also to let things in. Jesus says this very clearly in today's gospel. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

This is why the image of Jesus standing in front of the lychgate in the stained glass window at the back of the church is so meaningful. Jesus is the gate itself, and Jesus is the one who welcomes into our church the outcasts, the marginalized, and the unclean.

It's hard to imagine this today – especially with Transfiguration being known as the actor's church – but stage entertainers were viewed as such outcasts in the 19th century (due to their "loose living" and even "looser church attendance") that it wasn't surprising that a church would refuse to bury them. Although the view that actors are untouchables is no longer a common one, there are just as many outcasts today right around us – many of whom we don't even see or notice. Who are the George Hollands of today?

As you walk through the lychgate each time you enter our beloved parish, I invite you to reflect upon the powerful image from today's gospel of Jesus as the gate who welcomes you in. Imagine that you are walking in through Christ himself. In this Easter season, I invite you to reflect upon the One who wants us all to have life – and to have it abundantly.

I invite you to reflect upon how we, as a community, can continue – and build upon – the tradition of welcoming all who walk through the lychgate, just as if the Good Shepherd himself were standing there. Whether you might be a decades-long member of the parish going back to the rectorship of Fr. Catir, or whether you might be someone who has walked through the lychgate for the very first time today, you will find a welcoming pasture here.

"I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."