

Finding keys in my house is sometimes a challenge. Even though we have a designated spot for keys, I'm sorry to admit that they rarely get hung there. And then, of course, it's a mad scramble when you're running late to find the missing keys. Unfortunately, even my assistant Barbara will tell you she often hears me say those awful words: "Where Are My Keys?"

I don't think I'm alone with this challenge. I have the feeling this is a fairly common problem. I'm pretty sure that every household hears "Where Are My Keys" from at least 1 person. So let me reassure all of you keyless people, this sermon is not about fixing that problem!

The question about keys today, however, comes from the Scripture lesson I just read. You probably realized this, but it's because of this passage that we picture St. Peter as the keeper of the keys, standing at the gate of heaven deciding who gets in and who does not.

Which reminds me of the story of man named Fred who arrived at the Pearly Gates. When he got there, there was hardly any line, and he didn't have to wait more than a minute before his interview with St. Peter. Naturally, he was a little nervous about getting through the gates and into the heavenly city.

But very quickly he found himself standing in front of St. Peter, sitting behind a big desk with a clipboard getting Fred's entry data. After name, address and a few other particulars St. Peter said, "Fred, it would help the process if you could share with me some experience from your life on earth when you did a purely unselfish, kindly deed."

Well, Fred thought about it for a minute and then said, "Oh yes, I think I have something you might be interested in. One day I was walking along and I came upon a little old lady who was being mercilessly beaten up by a huge motorcycle-gang type of fellow. Well, I stepped right up. First, I pushed over his motorcycle - just to distract the biker's attention. And then I kicked him real hard in the shins and told the old lady to run for help. Then I hauled off and gave the guy a great shot right to the gut with my fist."

St. Peter looked at Fred with a great deal of interest and said, "Wow, that's quite a story. I'm impressed." Then, taking his clipboard in hand, St. Peter said, "Could you tell me just when this happened?"

Fred looked at his watch and said, "Oh, about 2 or 3 minutes ago."

So, how did Peter get the authority (as tradition has it) to hold those keys, and what exactly are they?

To answer those questions, we need to go back to the original scene with Jesus and the disciples. The city where this scene takes place is actually significant.

Jesus took his followers to Caesarea Philippi.

To be honest, when I first read this passage, the place didn't mean a thing to me. But as I found out more, I realized that this was probably a very deliberate trip - and deliberately mentioned in Matthew's Gospel.

The city was a long way from home for Jesus and the disciples - about 25 miles from Nazareth - which is quite a distance if you're on foot. It's possible that they came here because they wanted a rest. You have to remember that Jesus was quite well known by this point in his ministry. He was a great preacher, a great healer, and a miracle worker. But here in Caesarea Philippi, outside Jewish territory, probably no one knew them, and they were able to get a rest - away from the crowds.

But I think there is more significance here than that. Jesus wants to be sure the disciples understand exactly who he is and where they are heading. He is going to do that in a place that bombards the senses with the culture of that day.

First of all, the whole area is very beautiful, and the city at that time was a resort for the wealthy. It was also a pagan religious center. In that city alone there were 14 temples dedicated to the worship of the Syrian storm god Ba'al. The city was also home to a cave where legend had it that Pan, the Greek god of nature, was born. And then, high up on a prominent mountain peak, you could see a shining temple that was dedicated to the worship of Caesar. A very dramatic picture indeed.

Here, in an area littered with the splendor of wealth and the white marble temples to false gods, Jesus will be revealed as the Son of the one true God. The disciples would be right in the center of the world powers they would face as builders of the church.

So... it all starts with an innocent conversation - maybe they had just stopped for lunch. Jesus says, "By the way, guys, when you hear people talking, who do they say I am?"

Nothing intimidating about that - kind of a casual question.

The answers come fast and furiously. "Oh gosh, Jesus, they think you're amazing - John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the old prophets God has brought back from the dead.

But then it gets serious.

Jesus looks them right in the eye and asks, "But who do YOU say that I am?"

I'll bet the silence was deafening. None of them wanted to stick his neck out.

But finally Peter did. His answer rocked the world. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In other words, you are God, right here with us.

WOW! Peter "got" it! He understood who Jesus was. At that point, Jesus said to him the only beatitude he ever made up for a single person. Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! You are Peter!"

Peter? Just a minute Jesus, that's not his name. His real name is Simon or Simeon. Now he's Peter? That's a whole new name for him. It's a whole new identity.

Peter is from the Greek word *Petra*. Literally it means Rock - You Are Rock. And then Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church."

Rock? Peter is now Rock? Jesus, that **must** be a mistake! Maybe you mean Rock-y!? Stubborn like a rock. Sunk like a rock without Jesus in the Sea of Galilee. Hot Rock, perhaps, because of his fiery temper.

No. Jesus says, "You are Rock and on this rock I will build my church?!"

There have been a lot of interpretations for this sentence over the centuries. In fact, you probably know the most common one - that Peter will/must become the first bishop of Jerusalem, and thereafter his successors become the head of the church - popes.

Believe it or not, Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars agree that Peter was, indeed, an organizer of the early church in Jerusalem. But it was his faith and the power of his conviction that was foundational to the beginning of the church. The church wasn't built on him or around him. You see, Jesus is saying, "You are Solid, Peter. You are Rock. Because of your faith and what God has revealed to you, you are Rock. And it's on your conviction that I can and will build my church."

You see, it wasn't any human power - certainly not Peter himself - that made it possible for Petr to say and do what he did. It was the power of the Holy Spirit who took a "rocky" person - helped him recognize Jesus as the Christ - and then enabled him to become one of most eloquent leaders in the early church.

Many people think those early Christians were larger than life people - Holy people. They were not! Even Peter had a lot to learn. His confession of who Christ is was just the beginning. He was not a "rock" at that moment. He was too wishy-washy to be a rock regularly. Jesus saw beyond the guy who would put his foot in his mouth, who would deny Jesus three times when things got scary, who would be full of faults and weak moments many, many times.

I think that old phrase "Please be patient. God isn't finished with me yet" started with Peter. You see, Jesus saw the potential. Jesus saw the man who could and would be empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus saw the man who would then stand up and preach to the masses. Jesus saw the man who would become a significant leader in the new church. Jesus saw the possibilities.

That's such wonderful news for us - the really Good News! Peter's journey offers hope to us. Peter was not perfect, and neither are we. But Jesus sees our potential.

Jesus comes to us in the Caesarea Philippi of our lives. He comes to us right in the middle of our pagan temples - our cars, our houses, our bank accounts, our stock portfolios, our "me-culture," the overcrowded-overstocked busy-ness of our lives and - asks us the same question he asked the disciples. "Who do you say that I am?" And just like Peter, each one of us has to come up with our own answer.

We can't get caught up in saying what society says about Jesus. We can't even say what we hear our families say. Or what the political system says. Or even what I say - or the church says about Jesus.

Each of us has to answer on our own - "Who do you say that Jesus is?"

It's the whole point of Sunday School or Bible Study or a confirmation class.

Each person must decide for themselves.

Who do you say that Jesus is? Who is Jesus for you? What is your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is he just an interesting person to you? A colorful character in the Bible? A great teacher? An insurance policy for the end of your life? Or is he the Christ, the Son of the living God, your Savior, friend, provider, your hope in life or in death, and the ruler of your life?

If you say that he is the Son of God, that Jesus is in first place in your life, it doesn't mean you are already some perfect person. There's always a lot of growing to do. But it does mean that you will be open for the Holy Spirit to work in your life - a life that is changed and refreshed - a life that has a different perspective - a life that has new priorities.

When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus called Peter the rock on which he could build his church. If that confession is ours, we, too, are rocks - or at least stones! - That Jesus can use to continue to build the church - That Jesus can count on to do his work in this world.

Which brings us back to the original question - where are my keys?

What exactly were the keys Jesus gave Peter?

I can honestly tell you it didn't mean that Peter was going to decide forever who made it into heaven or not. And the binding and lessening part of it wasn't the forgiving or damning people to one place or another.

In the tradition of First Century Judaism, keys signified power and authority to teach what is right. Guess what? We have been given the same keys as Peter.

Each of us has the Kingdom Keys to bind up or loose the power of God's love, forgiveness, and compassion in the world.

So how do you use those keys? In your everyday life, do you embody the love, grace, and mercy of Christ? At home, at work, at school, in church, in stores when you're shopping, driving a car? Can others see that love, grace, and mercy in you? Are you using your Kingdom Keys to lock up God's love? OR are you using your Kingdom Keys to open the door to God's love and spread it around?

Do you know where your Keys are?

Please keep the following people in your thoughts and prayers ...

Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Bart, Patricia, Allen, Wendy and Nathan.