

**A Sermon for Parish of the Epiphany**  
**Winchester, Massachusetts**  
**Preached On**  
**August 21, 2011**  
**by the Rev. Thomas N. Mousin**

**Exodus 1:8-210**

**Matthew 16:13-20**

I am delighted to be here this morning and to have the opportunity to preach. As some of you know, although I will still be involved at the Parish of the Epiphany in many ways, in a few weeks I will be starting work in my new position as rector of Saint John's Episcopal Church in Charlestown. And although I don't officially start until September, in other ways I have already begun. For one thing, I have been given a key to the building. And you know what comes along with a key: privileges and accessibility. It's been great to be able to go over there to explore some of the spaces. It has been great to be able to visit with some parishioners there, and to have the chance to take friends over to see this new place where I will be working.

But of course, along with privileges, comes something else: responsibility. I'm one of those persons who, if I am the last person out of the house, or of a church, tends to worry. Have I turned off all the lights? Did I lock the office door? Is the stove still on? Did I turn off the iron? I don't even know if that church building has an iron, but that does not prevent those kinds of questions from going through my mind.

Our scripture lesson today is about the handing over of keys: persons given authority to act in ways that profoundly affect the lives of others. Keys are a great gift and a great responsibility. We encounter Jesus as he is asking his disciples who people think he is. They have responded with various things they have heard. But it is Peter who first acknowledges, and confesses, the reality: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

Having stated this truth, Peter is granted an enormous gift:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

There is power: that which we say and do, which may seem insignificant to us, may have an eternal significance of which we are hardly aware. There is substantial authority.

Now you may say that these words are said to Peter, and not necessarily to us. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, this passage is seen as giving Peter the right to become the leader of the

church after Jesus' death and resurrection. Every pope in the Roman Catholic Church sees his authority as rooted in the commission first given to Peter by Jesus.

But consider something else: What if Jesus is speaking not so much about Peter, but rather about Peter's confession: it is the confession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, by any and all believers that becomes the rock on which the community of faith, the church, will be built. And two chapters later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says the same thing to all of the disciples, including you and me:

"Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Mt. 18:18)

We are given keys to the kingdom – each of us has authority – an authority to make earthly choices that may have eternal significance.

The gift of a key. In my family, when you turned 17, the legal age to drive a car in New Jersey, you could expect a particular gift. When you opened your birthday presents at supper, taped to the inside of the card from my parents was a key to the family car. Now my parents did not give my siblings or me a new car. They gave us the privilege of driving the one family car. And the key to that Dodge station wagon was an amazing thing to hold.

We get a key, and we gain access to a vehicle, a place, or a position. But the key Jesus gives is a way to act, a power even to shape our world in ways that go beyond what we can see from earthly perspective. We are invited to live and act as if our choices thoughts and deeds reverberate in heaven as they do on earth. And while there is privilege there, think of the responsibilities and implications of such authority.

I sometimes like to share with others one of my predictions about heaven: that it is a place where people will know everything you ever said about them. And of course, you will know everything that has been said about you. Think about those conversations. I usually follow that by saying I have no scriptural or theological foundation for such a view. But maybe this passage from Matthew's Gospel is the foundation. Whatever we say on earth will be said in heaven.

And that makes me cautious. With authority comes responsibility. Yes, there was a key for me to our family car. But that wasn't automatic access to the car. Before I could ever use the key, I had to pass the state driving tests. I had to listen to clear and oft repeated instructions from my parents about both the enormous privilege and enormous responsibility of driving.

We know that those who have claimed authority in the church have not always used it responsibly. The history of the church is full of stories of those who, believing they are acting with God's authority, and in God's name, have harmed, oppressed, and killed others.

So it is no wonder that we might want to step back from acting and speaking as if we held the keys to the Kingdom. But is that really what Jesus is calling us to today?

For most of us, the problem is not that we have taken on too much authority in the name of our faith or risk doing so. If anything, I think most of us are too hesitant about seeing ourselves as citizens of the realm of God, let alone acting as those who are in possession of the power to make choices that will affect heaven and earth. Someone who spends a lot of time with me in the car when I am driving suggests that I am almost too careful and cautious. The result is that my tentativeness makes my driving less skillful and less safe.

So what would it look like to act with the kind of authority that Jesus gives us, to live as citizens of God's realm? Turn with me to our first reading, which gives us a picture of what it looks like to act in that way.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, one who did not know Joseph. Here is a new ruler with the keys to his kingdom. He does not know of the good things that Joseph had done. All he knows is that the growing Hebrew population represent a threat to his people and to his power. And so, using his earthly authority, he commands the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill any male Hebrew child that is born.

Now we have many churches and cathedrals named after Saint Peter But no church that I know of is named after Shiphrah or Puah. But look at their story. These two women, long before the birth of Christ, made their confession: they feared God. They held God in reverence. And acting with a divine kind of authority, they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

Here are two women, who made choices, loosing life on earth in a way that resounded in heaven. And then, two other women whose names we don't even know, the mother and sister of a newborn boy, conspire to keep him alive by placing him in a basket and hiding him in the bulrushes. And then a fifth woman, the daughter of the Pharaoh, finds him in the reeds and ensures that he will grow to adulthood. And that child of course, is Moses.

Consider these women. All acting with defiance. All acting with authority. All making choices that ultimately will lead an entire people from slavery into freedom. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. And whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Think about today. What we choose and what we say and what we do all reverberate. What if we do indeed have such divine authority?

What a responsibility.

What a privilege.

Amen.

