

The Narrow Gate

*Matthew 7:13-14; Luke
13:22-30*



*Year C Proper 16
(Episcopal); Year C Proper
16 (Catholic); Year C Lent
2 (Episcopal)*

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲		●
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲		●
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	■		●
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲		●
▲	Phillip - one of the youngest disciples, always well-meaning and honestly curious, sometimes lacking in confidence		▲	
▲	Jesus		▲	▲
●	Mary Magdalene - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past		▲	
●	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts		▲	
▲	Man in crowd - a member of the audience who asks Jesus an honest question and tries to answer Jesus' resulting challenge as sincerely as possible			▲

Scene 1

James , John , Judas , Peter

{A few of the senior disciples meet late one night.}

Judas I suppose you're wondering why I called this meeting.

James Oh, I can guess. I was about to call a meeting myself.

John Then you've both noticed it?

Judas I suppose so! You, too, it seems.

John I've been so worried.

Judas Worried? Why?

Peter Okay, I have no idea what you guys are talking about. Someone wanna clue me in?

James It's the rabbi. There's something wrong with him.

Judas Wrong?

John Well, maybe it's nothing to worry about after all, but I thought we should at least be aware of it.

James I think it's definitely something to worry about. We've already started losing donations, and soon, we're going to be losing the crowds.

John Wait, what?

Peter Yeah, what are you talking about? What are you *all* talking about?

{They all pause for a moment, realizing that they don't really know what the others were going to say, after all. They wait for someone to start over.}

James The rabbi's snapping at people during his sermons for no reason, refusing to answer questions and alienating the crowds. That's what we're here to talk about, isn't it?

John Not me. I wasn't aware this was happening at all. When's he been doing this?

James Just last week, for one. He called that synagogue leader a hypocrite and completely wrecked our engagement there!

John But that wasn't "snapping at people for no reason."

Judas *[to James]* Plus, I had the feeling that he was "snapping" not just at the synagogue guy, but you and me as well.

James Whatever. The point is that we could have gone on for a whole week there, teaching and healing, until the rabbi jammed a stone in the axle.

- Peter** Didn't he do the same thing with those rich donors, that time I wasn't invited to the hoity toity party?
- John** It's true. He preached a sermon about family like we asked him to, but it wasn't what those men wanted to hear. But I don't think that was a case of him snapping at someone either. It was quite purposeful.
- James** Exactly! It was almost as if he were purposely alienating them.
- Peter** You know, I think he did it again, a couple of days after that. I don't think any of you were there, but he was speaking to a group of travelers we ran into, and he preached a sermon about entering a narrow gate, and then somebody asked him, "Does that mean that only a few people will be saved?" and he suddenly got mad and snapped, "Who wants to know?" He wouldn't speak to them any more after that, and they went away pretty mad themselves.
- John** I don't think that was a bad answer. He said something very similar just a few days ago, and I thought it was a very wise reply. Remember, in that village square?
- Judas** He was preaching the narrow gate - again!
- John** Yes, and it not surprisingly led to the same question from someone in the crowd.
- James** I remember it well. That was going to be another one of my examples. He replied, "Will *you*?" Which I thought was incredibly rude.
- John** I'm not so sure. I felt like it was an answer that made you rethink the question.
- Peter** It didn't make those travelers rethink anything, except why they stopped to talk to us. If the rabbi wanted to make them think, he should have said it more kindly.
- John** Okay, I'll grant you that, but this ties into what I wanted to talk about. I think he's been under a lot of stress lately. He might even be sick. He's been slipping out of the camp every night and staying out in the woods until the wee hours. He's probably out there somewhere right now. Once, I followed him out part way and thought I heard him groaning in pain.
- James** I had no idea. Judas, is that why you called this meeting?

Judas Actually, no. I hadn't noticed any of the things you've seen, though I think what I have to say will make sense of everything. I believe the rabbi's turning toward Jerusalem again!

Peter *[with deep excitement]* Jerusalem!

John *[kicking himself]* It didn't even occur to me.

James I'd lost all hope of it ever happening!

John Judas, are you sure about this?

Peter Did the rabbi tell you plain, or did he just hint around like he does?

Judas He didn't say it outright, but I'm absolutely sure it's what he's thinking. He's been talking to me a lot about logistics lately, which he never used to do before, asking if we have enough money to stay in certain towns and take certain routes. He never named the final destination by name, but I can put two and two together. He's mapping out a route to Jerusalem, and he doesn't care if we have any money once we're there!

James *[caught up in the wonder]* Jerusalem! The Day is once more at hand.

Peter *[exuberantly]* I'm ready! I've been itching for a fight!

John I'm still worried about the rabbi. This is wonderful news about Jerusalem, but he's not acting like something wonderful's about to happen.

Judas That's understandable. After all, we don't really know what that Day will bring. The people might immediately embrace the his authority and the Romans might just walk away in the face of that, or Peter might get his wish.

James *[firmly]* Whatever happens, we'll be with him.

John Amen to that.

Peter There's just one thing I'm puzzled about. What's the narrow gate?

John *[after a moment of thought]* I think of it as a right way of living, a way of living that will save your soul.

James I think it's more than that. It's about following the rabbi specifically. He's urging people to join us, to get inside the Ark while the skies are

still clear, in a manner of speaking. *We* are the few who will be saved!

Peter Saved from what? And what does this have to do with the Day?

Judas If there's a real fight, then it's their literal lives that'll be saved. Those who aren't with us will be killed in battle.

John [*sadly*] That would explain why he's stressed. He's thinking of all the people who won't join him, he's thinking about all that destruction.

Peter [*reminding him*] Of his enemies.

John True.

James I'm just happy to be one of the few and not the many.

Scene 2

Jesus , Mary , Phillip , Thomas

{While the senior disciples have their meeting, Jesus has a chat with Thomas, Mary, Joanna, and Phillip.}

Phillip [*to Jesus*] Why did you want to talk to us? Did we do something wrong?

Jesus No, no. I just wanted to talk.

Mary Are you all right?

Jesus Why do you ask?

Mary You sound...tired.

Jesus I am. That's why I want to talk. I need some cheering up.

Thomas From us?

Phillip John and James and Judas went off for some kind of meeting, but they should be back soon.

Jesus I want to talk with *you*.

Thomas Uh, okay. What do you want to talk about?

Jesus I want to ask each of you a question: Do you believe that on the great day of judgement, you'll be saved?

{A long silence.}

Mary *[summoning her courage]* No!

Phillip What?

Thomas Mary, you shouldn't say things like that.

Jesus Why don't you believe you'll be saved?

Mary I just know I won't. I've done too many things. And more than that...I'm broken. Beyond fixing. Even by you. I'm sorry! You healed a great deal on that day we first met. You healed my life - I was dead, and now I live - but my soul is beyond help.

Jesus If you believe that, then why are you still following me?

Mary What else do I have to do? Where else do I have to go?

Jesus I thank you for your honesty. *[to the other two]* I hope you'll answer as well.

Phillip Okay, I guess I'll go next. My answer's easy: I just don't know! I hope I'll be saved, but I really don't know anything about it. I've tried to pay attention to your sermons and apply myself, but I'm afraid I don't understand any more than when I started. I don't know what it takes to be saved, so I don't know if I've done it. I'm sorry, rabbi.

Jesus There's nothing to apologize for. And now, Thomas the Doubter.

Thomas What? Oh, I guess you've heard them call me that. And it's true: I'm not sure I believe any of this yet. So my answer's the same as Phillip's, but for a different reason. It's not that I'm not sure if my soul will be saved; it's that I'm not sure if there are souls! I'm not sure there'll be a great day of judgement.

Jesus Is that all you're not sure about?

Thomas No. I'm not sure there's a God. *[a pause while Jesus continues to wait silently for more]* I'm not sure you're the Messiah.

Phillip *[self deprecatingly]* I guess you picked the wrong disciples to talk to tonight.

Jesus I think I did pretty well. I'm going to tell you something now - just you three - that I've never told anyone else, something I might *never* tell anyone else: On that great Day when the heavens and the earth will be transformed, and every living soul comes before the throne of God to be judged, you will absolutely, beyond all doubt and untouchable by any possible circumstance, be saved.

Scene 3

James , Jesus , John , Judas , Man , Peter

{The next day, Jesus is speaking to a large crowd, with all the disciples also in attendance. As he speaks, the disciples make comments about his sermon.}

Jesus Make every effort to enter the narrow gate!

Judas There's that narrow gate again.

Jesus Many will arrive only after it's been shut, and will stand outside knocking in vain!

John *[half to himself]* Dear God, might it really come to that?

Man Rabbi, does that mean that there are only a few who will be saved?

{Jesus only glares at him.}

Peter Uh oh. Here it comes!

Man I'm sorry for interrupting, but I'm worried about my friends and family, about all my countrymen. Even the Romans, I suppose. All people everywhere.

Jesus *[still harshly]* But not about yourself?

Man *[humbly]* There's no question of worrying about myself. All I can do is try my best to follow the way, whether it's hard or not. If that proves insufficient, I'll accept what comes next. But there are others I love who fret more about such things. They tear themselves up so much over the woes that beset them, they do more harm to themselves than anything else does. I can just see them on that Day, in hell, and that's the thought I can't bear.

Jesus *[softening]* You have a good heart. And you speak truly. Many on that

day will strain and plead at the gate, saying, "We ate and drank with you! You taught in our streets!" But the owner of the house will reply, "Get away! I have no idea who you are!" *[louder, back in preaching mode, to the whole crowd]* And don't rely on any favored place you think you might have in God's sight! Many in this chosen nation will find themselves outside the house, weeping and gnashing their teeth, while inside its doors, gentiles will sit at the table with Abraham and Issaac and Jacob.

Judas *[with relish]* Now he's mad again!

Jesus Many who thought they had an invitation to the party will find themselves barred at the gate. Many who thought they had a place on the Ark will find themselves caught by the rising waters.

James Wait, what did he just say?

Jesus *[speaking slowly and looking pointedly at everyone in the crowd, including the disciples]* Many who were first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

{Jesus steps down and the crowd begins to disperse.}

Peter Hey James, didn't you say something about the Ark, too?

James What did he mean by that? What did he mean by, "many who thought they had a place on the Ark will be caught outside?"

John Rabbi! Rabbi!

James No! Don't call him over!

{Jesus comes over to them.}

John Rabbi, we have a question.

Jesus Ask it.

James *[in a whisper, to John]* Don't tell him what I said! Don't ask him about the Ark!

John *[having to awkwardly think of a new question on the spot]* Uh, all those things you warned about, and especially that last part about the first being last: did you intend them only for the crowd, or were they meant for us, too?

Jesus Who wants to know?

You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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Freeman Ng is a writer, poet, and Google software engineer living in Oakland, California. He's also the author of:

- *Joan* - a novelization of the life of Joan of Arc
- *Who Am I?* - a personalizable picture book
- **Haiku Diem** - a daily haiku feed that's been going since July, 2010

www.AuthorFreeman.com