

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Every year the fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, and that's because our Gospel reading always comes from the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to John, where Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. It's a long enough chapter, with a number of different ideas around this theme, that you can get a different emphasis in each of the three years of the cycle. This one might be my favorite, since it reminds me of my grandfather and his sheep, which I talked about with the kids a few weeks ago, and then at On The Way last Monday. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd. It's true, at least in my limited experience.

I want to hit four things from our readings this morning to try and tie these readings into our lives of faith, the first two from our Gospel reading, then from our Psalm, and finally from our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. I mentioned in my newsletter article for May that Easter is a long season, taking up most of April and most of May this year. It is the longest season of the church year, understanding that the Sundays after Pentecost don't technically constitute a season, and this second half of the Easter Season that we are in now is the "now what?" part of season. Now that the reality of Jesus resurrection has sunk in, what does that really mean for us? What difference does it make in our lives, day to day? These readings start to get at an answer to those question.

First, Jesus' resurrection means that we are not left to our own devices, but that we have a shepherd to heed and to follow. Now, that may or may not seem like good news. It may *not* seem like good news if you know how daft and helpless sheep can be. I mentioned on Monday recently watching a recent video short of a group of men rescuing a sheep that had gotten stuck in a hole in the pasture. After some considerable effort, the sheep was free, and it started running around and quickly ended up falling into another hole. So if you think highly of yourself, you might find the idea of being compared to a sheep just a little insulting. But if, on the other hand, you are aware of your own fallibility, if you know that you sometimes fail to act in your own best interests, if you recognize that you are not fully in control of your life, then having a shepherd who has sworn to rescue you and who is there to set you back on the path of life, well that can be comforting news indeed.

Second, heeding and following our Shepherd means not following others who would claim our ultimate allegiance. It means not heeding other competing voices. And those voices, as you know, are all around us. Instead of inviting us to love God with all our strength and our neighbor as ourselves, those voices encourage us to look out for number one, to serve ourselves at the expense of others. Instead of loving and serving our neighbors, those voices encourage us to fear our neighbors, to shoot first and ask questions later, to guard and protect what is ours at all costs. Jesus warns us, though, that those other voices belong to thieves and bandits who, though they might seem like they're on our side, though they pretend to have our best interests at heart, really "come only to steal and kill and destroy." (v.10) When we are secure in our identity as sheep of the Good Shepherd, though, Jesus is confident that we will not listen to those voices, but run from them.

Third, following the Good Shepherd sometimes takes us through the valley of the shadow of death, as our psalm today famously declares. Thieves and bandits are persistent. Sin, death, and evil lurk around every corner and over every hill. The life of faith is not promised to be an

easy and carefree life. Difficulties abound. But when we are following the Good Shepherd, that valley is not our destination, and he will not let us get lost there. Psalm 23 follows immediately upon psalm 22, which Jesus quotes from the cross and which we heard chanted on Maundy Thursday at the stripping of the altar. You could think of it as the shadowy valley from which the 23rd Psalm comes as a relief. You might also be reminded that this Good Shepherd also lays down his life for the sheep. Literally. Biblical scholars tell us that that might be what lies behind Jesus calling himself the gate for the sheep in our Gospel reading. Apparently, there were sheep folds with narrow openings that didn't have a gate, but the shepherd would corral the flock into the fold and then lie down to sleep across the opening, keeping the sheep from wandering out and putting himself between them and would-be predators.

Finally, our first reading from Acts gives us a vision of what it looks like when the sheep are heeding the voice of the Good Shepherd, trusting the promise of the resurrection, and living out repentance, the change of perspective, attitude, and behavior that the Good News of Jesus makes possible. It's a remarkable and idyllic snapshot of life in the earliest church. But it is also a fleeting one. Four verses here at the end of chapter two which are echoed a little later by six verses at the end of chapter 4. The baptized believers held all things in common, this text tells us, selling their possessions in order to care for those in need, and eating and worshipping together. And they had the goodwill of all people. It's hard to see how it could have been any better. But it doesn't last. A total of 10 verses of perfection over two chapters is all we get before trouble begins. But it is enough, I think, to give us a glimpse of what the church might look like.

We get little, fleeting reflections here at Grace of what it looks like when we are heeding the voice of the Good Shepherd. Nothing so radical or all-encompassing as that remarkable moment in time in Acts, but reflections nonetheless, little glimpses like worshipping together, eating together, building community. We may not be selling all our possessions, but many of us are giving generously to support the life and mission of this congregation. And every Thursday morning, the south end of our building is abuzz with activity as our dedicated Food Pantry team helps out families in need. 57 families were helped this week alone. And these reflections are also thrown out beyond the walls of this building. Good Shepherd Sunday has long been a time for lifting up the ministry of Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, which is a combined ministry of the ELCA congregations throughout our state that has been caring for neighbors in need for a century and a half. I hope you'll have a look at the LSSI announcement in the GraceNotes that was sent to your e-mail this weekend, and that you'll follow the link provided there to access their website, both to learn about what they are up to, and to help support their efforts.

Sisters and brothers, siblings in Christ, sheep of the Good Shepherd, our Shepherd is still speaking, still calling us by name in the still waters of Holy Baptism, still setting a table before us, still faithfully leading us along the path of life. May we continue to heed his voice, may we continue to follow in his footsteps, and may we continue to echo in word and deed the great Good News that Christ is risen, alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!)