

4th Sunday of Easter – April 26, 2026

John 10:1-10; Ezekiel 34:7-15; Psalm 23; Acts 2:42-47

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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 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 we 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've talked about on more than one occasion here at Grace. Sheep know the voice of their shepherd. I can confirm, at least anecdotally, from 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 from our Gospel reading, the second from our first reading from Ezekiel, then from our Psalm, and finally from our second reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Easter is a long season that takes up most of April and most of May this year. It is the longest season of the church year, and this second half of the Easter Season that we are in now is the "now what?" part of the 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 daily lives? These readings help lead us toward an answer to those questions.

First, Jesus' resurrection means that we are not left to our own devices. We need help, and we get that help in the form of shepherding, a voice to call us, an abiding presence to protect us. 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. So if you think highly of yourself, you might find the idea of being compared to a sheep just a little insulting. Because we know that the real sheep are the people who mindlessly follow the politicians and influencers we disagree with. 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 promised 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 the *Good* Shepherd means not following the *bad* shepherds. And there are bad shepherds. They are, to use the language of our baptismal rite, all the powers that defy God, rebel against God, and draw us away from God. The bad shepherds that Ezekiel is talking about in our first reading are the kings of Israel, who ended up doing just what God warned they *would* do when the Israelites asked for a king, because it's what kings *always* do with their power: they abuse it for their own selfish purposes, and at the expense of those they are meant to rule and care for. Those who say that religion should stay out of politics have not read their Bibles very carefully, because God has a lot to say about politics. Even our beloved Psalm 23 that we sang for you a few minutes ago has unmistakable political overtones. "The Lord is my shepherd" means "God is my king." And when Jesus says that "all who came before me were thieves and bandits" he is alluding to texts like our Ezekiel reading. Instead of inviting us to love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves, the competing voices of the thieves and bandits encourage us to fear our neighbors, to guard and protect what is ours, and to trust that they will take care of us, even as they fleece us. But when we are secure in our identity as sheep who belong to the *Good* Shepherd, Jesus is confident that we will not listen to those voices, but follow him in the way of life.

Third, following the Good Shepherd in the way of life sometimes takes us through the valley of the shadow of death, as Psalm 23 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 after 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 Psalm 22 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. Some scholars suggest that that is 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 an actual 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. Jesus lays down his life for us on the cross, putting himself between us and the powers of sin, death, and evil, and rises to lead us into abundant life.

Finally, our first reading from Acts gives us a vision of that abundant life, 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 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 and playing together, building community. We may not be selling all our possessions, but many of us are giving generously of our time and resources 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. More than 60 families were helped this week alone. That was the estimate when I checked in a little before noon. 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 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 to us, 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!)