

Sunday, April 22, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
Acts 4.5-12; 1 John 3.16-24; John 10.11-18
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Here at the mid-point of Eastertide, we shift our attention, although not our primary focus. In the first half of the Easter season, we heard accounts of several of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances. We examined what these direct experiences of the Risen Lord meant for the disciples, and what they continue to mean for us as Easter people. Now we are done with those accounts. For the remainder of this season we look at various well-known images that Jesus uses to describe himself. Images that he offered prior to his death. Images in which he attempted to give the disciples, and us, a foretaste of how we are to live in light of what was to – or for us, has already – come. Images that provide more depth to what it means to live the resurrected life than can be gleaned from the post-Resurrection appearances themselves. Images that, in hindsight, we see are lessons for our lives of faith.

Today we have the well-known image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. A story that we have all heard many times. A story that we have all seen depicted numerous times in paintings and stained-glass windows. A story that is perhaps the most comforting image of our Lord and of our relationship with him.

In Jesus' description of himself, he starts off by explaining who he is as the Good Shepherd by comparing and contrasting himself with shepherds who are hired hands. Those who do not own the sheep but rather are merely hired to care for them. He observes that hired hands really don't have any dedication to the sheep they are charged with caring for. At the first sign of threats, such as wolves, the hired hands take off – more concerned for their own well-being than that of the sheep. And as a result, the sheep are scattered, or worse, are harmed.

On the other hand, the good shepherd has a very real connection with the sheep. They are not just a bunch of animals to be watched over. The good shepherd knows each of them. And the sheep know him and trust him implicitly because the good shepherd puts the sheep first, caring for them, protecting them, even at cost to himself. Jesus wraps all of this up in terms of "laying down his life" for the sheep. In fact, in describing himself as the good shepherd, Jesus states the absolute extent of his commitment to those in his care. "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father" (Jn 10.17-18).

Of course, this side of the Resurrection we recognize that Jesus was alluding to his impending death and Resurrection. That he was willing to lay down his life for humanity – his death. And that he would be able to take his life up again – be resurrected – and thereby overcome death. Not just for himself, but for all those in his care. For all people. This side of Easter, we see how he laid down his life for us in both ways – giving his life for us and defeating death on our behalf so that we may live into the resurrected life.

In the model of Christ as the good shepherd, we are certainly meant to identify with the sheep. Primarily in terms of the radical trust that sheep have for their shepherd. Radical trust to follow wherever he leads us, knowing that he will not lead us into danger. That he will not abandon us. In his own laying down of his life, he has taken away the dangers of sin and death. He has not abandoned us to sin and death. Because of this, we are able to trust that he will only lead us to what and where is ultimately best for us. To new life with him.

While we are meant to follow in trust, unlike real sheep, we are not meant to do so blindly. Blindly following is not enough. Because, frankly, sheep are not a particularly good model for the Christian life. Yes, faithfully following and being obedient to Christ are important qualities – necessary qualities – in the Christian life. No doubt about it. Christ himself demonstrated these throughout his life and ministry. He demonstrated these in his journey to the cross. Christ's faithfulness and obedience are meant to be an example for us. Even more than an example. They are the source from which we draw our life. They are what give us our purpose as followers of Christ. They are what motivate us to choose to follow Christ into the resurrected life. Because we do have a choice of whether or not we live into the resurrected life. We have a choice as to how we live into the resurrected life.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles provides an example of the early Church living into the resurrected life. After Jesus' death and Resurrection, the disciples initially cowered in fear, locked behind closed doors. They wanted to keep themselves safe. To return to their old lives before Jesus came on the scene. But because of Jesus' post-Resurrection appearances, they were transformed. They realized that Jesus was calling them to continue on without him. Well, without him physically. For in the resurrected life, he would never be apart from them.

In the account from Acts, Peter and John are arrested for teaching, for proclaiming the good news of the Resurrection, and for performing acts of healing. The temple authorities ask "By what power or by what name did you do this?" (Acts 4.7b). Peter gives a lengthy answer, but the bottom line is that the disciples are doing these things in "the name of the Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom [had been crucified], whom God raised from the dead" (Acts 4.10). It was this name of Jesus that gave them the strength and the courage to go out and boldly proclaim what they had witnessed. To proclaim what they came to know to be the truth.

Where they found their strength and courage is summed up in our Epistle reading from the First Letter of John. In this reading, John reminds us, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 Jn 3.16). This statement recalls for the disciples and for us Jesus' commandment given at the Last Supper – what we heard proclaimed on Maundy Thursday. John then gives instruction as to what this truly means. "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 Jn 3.18). It was Jesus' commandment to love others, as demonstrated in his washing of their feet, which reminded them of the truth of Jesus' life and ministry. The truth of his death and Resurrection. And it is this truth that motivates them to action.

Now, to pull these strands together. The image of the good shepherd. The disciples proclaiming the Resurrection in word and action, in the name of Jesus Christ the Risen Lord. Doing this because he had commanded them to do so.

Post-Resurrection, we recognize that we are the Body of Christ. But that isn't just a quaint image for a collection of people who believe in Jesus. Through the transforming power of the Resurrection, we really are the Body of Christ here and now. Energized by his Spirit, we literally continue the work of his ministry. We are his hands, his feet, his heart, operating in the world. His work doesn't get done if the Body does not do it.

This being the case, if Christ was – is – the Good Shepherd, are we not likewise called to be good shepherds? We are not called to be the capital G Good capital S Shepherd. But we are called to be small g good small s shepherds in the model of Jesus. We are called to be good shepherds functioning in the name of the one true Good Shepherd. Following his example of dedication to and caring for his sheep. Those sheep who may or may not yet know the love of Christ.

As Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice” (Jn 10.16). In this post-Resurrection world, we serve as his voice, proclaiming the truth of what Christ did, what he has accomplished. Like the shepherd we follow, we ourselves are called to lead into the fold those who do not yet know the love of Christ.

This is not easy work. But it is work that has been placed upon us nonetheless. We are not hired for this work, as are those other shepherds Jesus contrasts himself with. Rather, we are commissioned by virtue of our baptism to do the work of the Good Shepherd. Like hired hands, we may be tempted at times to run away when things seem difficult, when confronted with the wolves of our own age. But the Good Shepherd who leads us is steadfast in his devotion and supports us in the work we do on his behalf. He calls us to remain steadfast, as well.

This is what it means to live into the resurrected life. To not just follow the Good Shepherd, but to live into the example of the Good Shepherd, by whose power and name we are invited and called into his sacred work.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
(The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!)