

Sunday, April 25, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year B)

1 John 3.16-24; John 10.11-18

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1647083059015040>

(Sermon begins at about 17:55)

“Living Resurrected Lives as Good Shepherds”

As of today, we are done with Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances. Through the remainder of Eastertide we focus instead on delving into just what it means to be a post-resurrection people. To be a people who follow the Risen Christ and seek to live resurrected lives. And, of course, as we do every Eastertide, we begin with one of the most well-known and most beloved images of that life. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This image tells us a lot about who Jesus is, but it also provides a model for how we are to live as those who follow Jesus—to live our own resurrected lives.

To set the stage, the Gospel reading we just heard takes place prior to Jesus’ Passion. He has already foretold his death, but has not yet made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But by this time, he is mentally there. At least he has given voice to what will happen and has turned his thoughts to the inevitable. From here on out, his primary focus is on moving ever closer to his destiny. To what his life and his ministry have been leading up to. As a result, he is becoming more focused not only on preparing himself mentally, but also on preparing his disciples. Laying the foundation so that when he is gone, they will be able to continue in his name.

What we hear in today’s Gospel is actually the second half of Jesus’ “Good Shepherd” discourse. Although it is in today’s portion where Jesus first makes the statement, “I am the good shepherd.” He then goes on to explain just how he is the good shepherd. Most notably, Jesus’ statements about how he is the good shepherd is contrasted with the characteristics of the hired hand. Thinly veiled images of the religious establishment—most notably the Pharisees and the temple authorities. But this is a reference not just to the religious authorities of his time, but also authorities, primarily secular, throughout much of Jewish history; including a number of kings who came after King David, the shepherd king. For his original hearers, Jesus’ words would have called to mind the oracles of the Prophet Ezekiel who condemned the “shepherds of Israel,” the corrupt authorities of ancient times who exploited the people for their own purposes. Oracles that continue by pointing to God himself as the true shepherd who will gather the sheep—the people—together to feed them, to heal them, to nurture them, to protect them. Oracles about God liberating his people from exile in Babylon and returning them to their own land, where God alone will care for them and protect them.¹

Jesus’ use of the good shepherd imagery was therefore loaded with meaning that his hearers would have understood because of their own knowledge of their history. It would be like one of our own leaders likening themselves to Abraham Lincoln. An image that for us carries great weight and meaning as the Great Emancipator. A part of our history that we know so well that there would be no need for elaboration. This is what Jesus was doing. Calling on a historical

image that everyone would immediately understand and be able to recognize the core message.

In using the image of the good shepherd, Jesus was presenting himself in contrast to the religious and secular leaders of his day who failed to care for God's people. He was offering himself as an alternative to those supposed shepherds. Shepherds whom he characterizes more as hired hands than true shepherds of the people. Not that hired hands are inherently bad. Not that they are set on destroying the sheep. They just aren't committed enough to be willing to go all in, to lay down their own lives for those they are charged with shepherding. Jesus presents a contrast, an alternative, to those who, because of lack of absolute commitment, certainly could not be characterized as good shepherds.

The other thing to realize about Jesus' use of the term "good shepherd" is just what he means by the shepherd being "good." The word Jesus uses, the word we translate as "good," does not have anything to do with the quality of the work the shepherd does. It does not mean "morally good." Rather, the meaning is more akin to "'real and proper' or 'true,' as in, 'I am the true shepherd' or 'I am the genuine shepherd.'"²

So, what makes for a real and proper, a true and genuine, shepherd? Jesus talks about such qualities as "the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep" (Jn 10.11). A good shepherd knows his own and his own know him (Jn 10.14b). While these are important qualities—certainly good and admirable—they do not really say a whole lot about what makes Jesus the good shepherd. What distinguishes him from any other competent and capable shepherd. Don't get me wrong, knowing his own and certainly laying down his life for them is no small matter. But there seems to be something missing. What is the deeper connection? What is it that distinguishes Jesus from others who, like the shepherds called out by the Prophet Ezekiel, may have even had good intentions, yet failed to truly live up to expectations, to live into the role as good shepherd? As the epitome of what it means to be the good shepherd.

For that, we need to step back ever so slightly in John's Gospel. By half a verse. The last statement before today's Gospel reading is quite significant: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10.10b). This is what distinguishes Jesus from other shepherds—good or otherwise. Sure, the shepherd's job is to feed the sheep, to protect them from danger, to provide them with shelter. That's sort of the bare minimum of the shepherd's job description. But Jesus, in casting himself as the good shepherd, as the true, genuine shepherd, takes that job description to new heights. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Of course, when Jesus says "they," he is referring to his sheep. To those whom he shepherds. To those who follow him. He is referring to us. Each and every one of us. So, to translate, what makes Jesus the good shepherd? What makes Jesus the true and genuine shepherd, unlike any other? "I came that YOU may have life, and have it abundantly." You. Think about that for a moment.

Jesus is telling his followers—those with him 2,000 years ago, and those of us gathered today—I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly. That is his fervent desire for each and every one of us. That is not just some nice sounding goal. It is a promise. One that Jesus made with his life. That he willingly laid down his life to ensure that abundance. In fact, it was

ultimately the fact that he laid down his life, that he went to the cross, that secured the abundance of life that he promises. Through his death and subsequent Resurrection, Christ broke the bonds of sin and death that had previously enslaved humanity. In laying down his life for us, Jesus went up against the forces of evil and darkness that sought to oppress humanity, not just in this life, but in the next. Through his death and Resurrection, Christ overcame the darkness, securing our liberation from sin and death. Securing our forgiveness, our salvation, and our place in God's eternal kingdom. A life in the age to come that is free from the oppressive wages of sin—wages that we could not possibly pay in a zillion years. A life in the age to come that is not confined by the limits of mortal, human life, but rather the promise of eternal life. Eternal life spent in God's love and intimacy. Forgiveness. Salvation. Eternal life. That is truly life abundant.

Okay, that's all well and good. Forgiveness and eternal life. But what about now? What about our lives this side of our entry into the heavenly realm? Where is the life abundant that Jesus, the good shepherd, promises?

A clue to this can be found in our Epistle reading from the First Letter of John. John starts off by acknowledging "We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us" (1 Jn 3.16). Affirmation of the profound love that Christ has for us as demonstrated by the fact that he willingly laid down his life for our sake. To serve as our good shepherd. To secure for us life abundant. But John quickly follows up with "and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 Jn 3.16b).

Now John is not talking about literally laying down our lives for one another. But he is talking about putting our own self-interests aside—just as Jesus put his own self-interests aside—to care for any who are in need. That because of what Christ has done for us—provided for life abundant—we know firsthand what true love is. We give our lives for others, we give of ourselves to help others, because we want to share that love with those in need of experiencing it. In this way, we are helping to share the life abundant that Christ first shared with us.

Not unlike in Ezekiel's time, not unlike in Jesus' time, there seems to be a scarcity of good shepherds in our own time. Not that they don't exist. But with all that is going on in the world, at the very least, it seems that their voices may be drowned out. That their attention may be stretched to the limit or beyond because of so much need for sharing of love and providing of life abundant. And in some cases, it is hard, with conflicting narratives in our society, to adequately discern who really are the good shepherds in the midst of so many who would claim the description. Particularly with an increasingly prevalent societal narrative based on scarcity, insecurity, and fear, we are in more need than ever for the example of one that is based on providing life abundant.

As those who choose to follow Jesus, as those who live a resurrected life, our response to this scarcity of not even good shepherds, but of adequate shepherds; our response to the narrative of scarcity, insecurity, and fear; is to present an alternative example. Just as Jesus did in his own times. The example of Jesus as the good shepherd. To do that, we are called to be good shepherds in our own contexts. Working to share God's love, working to bring about life abundant for those we are called to minister to. Of course, we cannot even begin to provide

what Jesus promises and indeed, provides. But we can give a foretaste. We can do what shepherds do. We can care for and nurture. We can point the way. We can guide others to the right path. All the while, trusting that Christ the Good Shepherd will take it from there.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

¹ Ezekiel Chapter 34.

² "The Good Shepherd: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Easter 4," SALT, April 20, 2021.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/4/17/the-good-shepherd-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-4b>.