

Sunday, April 26, 2026
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

John 10.1-10

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Gate to Life Abundant”

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Since Easter, our Gospel readings have focused on various post-resurrection appearances, all occurring on the Day of the Resurrection, on the first Easter Day. As of today, we shift the focus, leaving behind the Gospel accounts of the Risen Christ appearing to the disciples, or anyone else for that matter. Although, following those appearances, the Risen Christ continued to be around for another forty days before making his final exit (for the time being, anyway) and ascending into heaven. The Gospel records vary, but there is a strong indication that the Resurrected Jesus continued to interact with the disciples during the intervening time. Continuing to teach them and prepare them for what would come following his Ascension, what would be required particularly following Pentecost and him sending the Holy Spirit. Until that time, until Pentecost, the disciples and all who followed Jesus were in a liminal state, in an in-between time, learning and receiving wisdom from the Resurrected Christ. What those teachings entailed are not recorded or have been lost to us.

With another two and a half weeks to the Ascension and another four weeks until Pentecost, we, too, are in a liminal state, an in-between time. We are still in Eastertide, but we have no more post-resurrection appearances to focus on. Well, there are still some from Easter Day, those contained in the Gospels we did not touch on this year, but frankly, you can only glean so much from variations of the same initial appearances to Mary Magdalene and to the eleven apostles. So, for the remaining Sundays in Eastertide, we shift our focus to some of the quintessential teachings of Jesus that focus on living in intimacy with God. Teachings that, while originally occurring before the Passion, in hindsight, may have been intended to prepare the disciples for this life post-resurrection. To give the disciples a foundation that would help them—and us—more fully understand what Easter means in our ongoing lives of faith.

If asked to provide a favorite image of who Jesus is, I would venture that a sizeable number would cite that of the “Good Shepherd.” One of the most comforting and beloved images of Jesus. Today’s Gospel reading is a portion of Jesus’ Good Shepherd discourse. What we hear today is just the beginning—the first half—of Jesus’ analogy of himself as the Good Shepherd. And if read closely, you will see that, at least in today’s portion of John Chapter 10, Jesus never refers to himself as the Good Shepherd. We just assume, based on what he says about good versus bad shepherds, that he is talking about himself. He does not actually say “I am the good shepherd” until the first verse AFTER today’s Gospel. Before he emphatically states that he is the Good Shepherd, Jesus uses a different image to describe himself. Which is, in itself, telling. Indicating that before we get distracted by the more well-known and comforting image of Jesus as Good Shepherd, there is another image for Jesus that deserves our attention. Particularly in the light of the resurrection.

First off, what prompts Jesus to deliver this particular discourse? For that, we need to step back to what happens immediately before. Jesus had just healed the man born blind. You recall him. We discussed him six weeks ago on the Fourth Sunday in Lent. Jesus restored this man's sight on a sabbath, prompting immediate criticism from the temple authorities. Near the end of that passage, Jesus says to the man he healed, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (Jn 9.39). A comment overheard by some of the Pharisees, who immediately realize Jesus is making a comment about them being spiritually blind: unable to see the truth of who God is.

The Good Shepherd discourse is Jesus' response to the Pharisees' indignation at the implication that they, the religious authorities, could possibly be spiritually blind. Realization of which casts the Good Shepherd discourse in a different light. Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus immediately starts off with "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep." The Pharisees, well-versed in the Hebrew Scriptures, would have recognized precisely what Jesus was saying. That Jesus was condemning them. In the Hebrew Scriptures, one of the images used for God's people is that of sheep. Sheep in need of someone—a shepherd—to care for them. Various, as in the 23rd Psalm, God is that shepherd. In other places, various prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel use language that describes the long-awaited Messiah as being a caring and skilled shepherd who will come to care for God's people. And conversely, some of the prophets, including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, contrast the divine shepherd with bad or worthless shepherds, who neglect and exploit the sheep. Resulting in sheep being lost, the flock being scattered. It is this latter category of bad shepherds to which Jesus is comparing the Pharisees.

The picture Jesus sets up is that of the sheepfold. Enclosures that were used by shepherds to keep their flocks safe at night—safe from predatory animals, as well as from opportunistic thieves and bandits. Multiple flocks, under the care of multiple shepherds, would have been corralled into any given sheepfold. Each shepherd responsible for the care and wellbeing of his flock. The sheep of each flock being attuned to their own shepherd, to the sound of his voice. Each shepherd leading his flock out of the sheepfold in the morning to graze in green pastures, to drink in nearby streams. Leading them back to the sheepfold at night to sleep in safety. To further safeguard the sheep corralled in the sheepfold, each enclosure would have had a single point of ingress and egress, controlled by a gate. And a designated gatekeeper would guard the access. A gatekeeper who would have known all the shepherds, if not also likely knowing their respective flocks. The gatekeeper's job would be to confirm the shepherds' identity before allowing access to the sheep in the sheepfold. The gatekeeper providing yet one more layer of protection to safeguard the wellbeing of the sheep.

The Pharisees do not quite understand what Jesus is saying in this "figure of speech," as John calls it. Perhaps because they are identifying themselves with good shepherds as opposed to thieves and bandits. And, to their defense, they really do believe they are doing what they are called to do as protectors of God's flock. They are not maliciously seeking to harm those under their care. It's just that they could do a little better, to be a little more in alignment with what God desires for his flock.

Since sheep are a common image for God's people, Jesus' use of the image of a sheepfold implies that this is God's domain. The place where God provides care and shelter for his own. Also implying that even though all are God's, they are part of a variety of flocks under the care of various shepherds. Perhaps this is why Jesus does not initially identify himself as being a good shepherd—they are all identifying themselves as such. Rather, he says, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." He identifies himself as one who is not just a shepherd, but as the one charged with the wellbeing of all flocks, regardless of who their shepherd might be. As the gate, as opposed to simply a shepherd, Jesus is emphatically stating that he is the point of access to this enclosure that is God's kingdom. As the gate, as the gatekeeper, he is the point of access to God and God's realm, to the ultimate care and protection that only God can and does provide.

This discourse was initially presented prior to Jesus' Passion. Taking a look back at the images presented today—the image of the Good Shepherd, the image of the gate with which Jesus identifies himself—taking a fresh look through the lens of what we have just experienced in the death and resurrection of Jesus, casts the meaning of these images in a new light. Particularly the image of Jesus as the gate. Jesus as the means of access to God's kingdom. Jesus as the gate being the means of access to new life. As the gate, Jesus, through his death and resurrection, provides access and new life in a whole new way. That through him we enter into new and eternal life previously not available to us. In this, the whole set of imagery Jesus employs takes on new meaning, pointing to, foreshadowing, what he would accomplish through his Passion, through his resurrection.

Jesus says as much in today's Gospel. Hear again the last two verses of today's passage. "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Through his death and resurrection, Jesus is the gate to new and eternal life. Jesus is the gate to forgiveness of our sins. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has broken the bonds that sin and death previously held over humankind. The bonds of sin and death wielded by "the thief," by the powers of darkness, that came "to steal and kill and destroy" us and our ability to enter into the fullness of relationship with God that God desires for us. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus becoming the gate that prevents the bonds of sin and death, wielded by the power of darkness, from entering in. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus becoming the gate that allows us to enter into the fullness of God's kingdom. That we "may have life, and have it abundantly." In Christ's resurrection and all that has been accomplished through it, we are promised eternal life in him and with him. You can't get much more abundant than that!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!