



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Easter 4
Year B**

The Good Shepherd

[RCL]: Acts 4:5-12; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Today's gospel text uses an image that may be lost on many of us, an image that we may know from childhood stories — but not firsthand experience. Jesus, living in the first century, talking to people who know livestock and agriculture in their hearts and bones, tells his disciples, his friends, us, that he is the Good Shepherd.

We hear this story, or parts of it, year after year, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter. We hear it when Jesus has not only laid down his life for his friends, but has taken it back up, defeating death, sin, and the grave. His disciples hear it before Jesus has even gotten back to Jerusalem. The disciples are where they were through all of Lent — hearing Jesus predict his death, in disbelief at it, and somewhat perplexed. They don't think he's going to die. We know he's died and risen again.

Our text today is the second half of Jesus' describing himself as the Good Shepherd, a story split in two over the course of church years. Today, Jesus makes the distinction between himself, the Good Shepherd, and the hired hand. "The Good Shepherd," Jesus says, "is willing to die. They'll get down with the sheep even when the wolf comes. They'll give up their own life to save the sheep."

He contrasts this with the hired hand, someone whose work is seasonal but who isn't invested in the sheep or the property. "The hired hand," Jesus says, "says, 'Nope! I'm outta here!' when the wolf comes." The hired hand's work is probably temporary anyway, depending on the season and need. Why would they stick around when a wolf comes? Depending on the shepherd's fairness and practices, there may not have been any guarantee that they would be paid. When a wolf comes with no human to guard against it, that leaves the sheep scattered — or worse, gobbled up.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." This second half of Jesus' Good Shepherd narrative is remarkably tender, vulnerable, and human. Shepherds were dirty, hungry, and scrappy. They lived out mostly on their own with a vast responsibility. Their only company was sheep, and they had to learn to love them.

Jesus is telling his disciples then and now that this is how he cares for us. He's not a leader who is around just long enough to get paid. He's not there to just do the easy work. Jesus the Good Shepherd has come to offer salvation: salvation through love, self-giving, tenderness, and vulnerability.

The chapel at General Seminary in New York is the Chapel of the Good Shepherd. Each year, dozens of students move from all over the world, following God to lead God's people. Many are not from New York City, and don't know what kinds of wolves they may face there, from temptation and vice to greed and violence. At the center of their campus is a chapel dedicated to Jesus the Good Shepherd, who knows his own and whose own know him.

The centerpiece of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd is, yes, a sculpture of Jesus the Good Shepherd. This sculpture is not a traditional one, where Jesus has a sheep slung over his shoulders, carrying it back from a rescue. This Jesus looks out at the seminarians and knows them — as they hope to know him. In his left hand, he holds a shepherd's crook, a crozier, herding sheep as the ultimate overseer of the Church. In his right? A lamb held close to his chest, the way many of us might hold a cat we love. He stands looking out over the chapel, a place of silence and solace amid the noise and excitement of New York, with another sheep at his side. This sheep is leaned against Jesus, relying on him for support, demonstrating affection with touch. Jesus knows his own, and his own know him.

Before the plot, his trial, his execution, or his resurrection, Jesus tells the disciples that he lays his life down for his sheep. He protects them from the wolves. He brings them life. He tells his disciples, too, that there are other sheep to which he must attend, others who follow him, but that aren't a part of the fold they know, the fold of which they are part.

Before our passage today, Jesus has just told the disciples that he is the gate, the pathway for attaining salvation — and tells them even still they don't know it all. He will attend to these other sheep and there will be one flock, one people who have been brought to salvation. Jesus the Good Shepherd doesn't give his disciples directions right now on who is in or who is out. He doesn't give a timeline for when this one flock will be achieved. What he says more than once, though, is that those who are his know him, and he knows them. He says that he loves them, and that he lays down his life for them.

Jesus is giving his disciples an Easter message before he's even been crucified. "I lay down my life in order to take it up again... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again." Jesus the Good Shepherd doesn't run from the wolves, he gets in the muck with the sheep and loves us. We started learning about that when God became human and let Godself be bound to our earthly, fleshy limitations.

He holds us close to his chest or lets us lean on him when we need to be held and touched, and he faces the greatest enemy we have: death. He does by his own will, not because he's compelled to. He does it from his desire, not to satisfy a blood necessity. He does it on his own, not to appease the Creator's wrath. "For this reason the Father loves me," Jesus says, "because I lay down my life in order to take it up again."

Jesus lays down his life and takes it up again. He beats death, hell, and the grave, all the wolves we'll ever face, and the adversary — Satan — himself. Jesus lays down his life and takes it up again, alleluia! Jesus the Good Shepherd loves his own, loving them to the point of death — and loving them even through death, to raise them from death, to bring salvation.

Jesus the Good Shepherd isn't a Precious Moments painting or collectible, however sweet that may feel or seem. Love — love enough to lay down one's life and take it back up again — isn't only sweet and it isn't only a moment. It's earthy and dirty. It's dangerous and deadly. But this is Jesus the resurrected Christ, alleluia. The Good Shepherd who knows his own, whose own know him, who lays down his life for them — even when the hired hand won't.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is tender, affectionate, and vulnerable. As he tends to us in Bread and Wine, getting back into the physical, touchable reality of humanity — like a shepherd in the wild fields — he joins us to his life, his life that he laid down and took back up. Jesus the Good Shepherd knows us as his own, and we know him. Amen.

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