

**4 Easter
May 3, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This is the fourth Sunday of our Easter season. The Fourth Sunday of Easter is called "Good Shepherd Sunday." Although the readings change each year in our three year lectionary cycle, every Fourth Sunday of Easter we hear a portion the 10th chapter of John's gospel.

In one year, Jesus makes the very clear and bold assertion, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." In another year, Jesus says, "My sheep know my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish." However, although this year the images of sheep and shepherd are present, Jesus says, "I am the **gate**. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

And ... as if it was really necessary ... on Good Shepherd Sunday the appointed Psalm is either Psalm 23 ... "The Lord is my shepherd," or Psalm 100 ... "we are his people and the sheep of his pasture." It is obvious that those who selected the readings wanted us to get the point ... today is Good Shepherd Sunday.

All that being said, I'm somewhat confused by the portion of John's gospel that we read this morning. In the first part of the reading Jesus shares some thoughts with his disciples and he uses the images of a "sheepfold," a "**gate**," a "gatekeeper," a "bandit," a "stranger," and ... of course, a "shepherd of the sheep." The narrator of John's gospel then says, "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them." The next verse begins with, "So Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the **gate** for the sheep."

Then he says it again, "I am the **gate**." Later in the same chapter he says, "I am the good shepherd," and "My sheep hear my voice" ... those are the portions of the 10th chapter of John that we read in other years of our lectionary cycle. Yet in the lesson today Jesus refers to himself as the "**gate**." Not the "shepherd." Not the "gatekeeper." But, the "**gate**."

I'm confused. So, in my confusion I thought I'd consult with some experts.

Joe and Melanie Sampson ... members of the parish ... this amazing couple owned and ran a sheep ranch in Wyoming for 29 years. What better source of knowledge about sheep, and shepherds, and sheepfolds, and **gates** than Joe and Melanie.

So, I called them on the phone and asked them if they had a "sheepfold" on their ranch. There was a long pause ... "Oh, maybe a "sheepfold" is the same as a holding pen," said Melanie ... "or

a corral,” Joe chimed in. I then asked them about **gates**. “Yes,” they had lots of **gates** on their ranch ... but the sheep seemed to have a way of avoiding the **gates** and finding a way out of whatever area that was fenced in. At that point, I was distracted by the thought of these sheep wandering away from their fenced enclosure. As I told Melanie and Joe ... “I think that is another parable.”

One thing Joe did tell me was that when flocks of sheep owned by different people were mingled in a holding pen, a shepherd could call his sheep and they would follow him out the gate ... just the shepherd’s flock, and no other sheep, would follow his voice. A hint of some reality in this gospel reading.

Yet, even after talking with Joe and Melanie, I was still confused ... not that they didn’t have some excellent information about sheep and shepherding, but I was not enlightened theologically. I’m not sure about Jesus saying, “I am the **gate**.” For that matter, I’m not really sure about all the other images as well. And, I’m really not sure why, in the middle of Easter season ... the season of the Resurrection ... why we have these stories which seem to have nothing to do with the Resurrection. They are wonderful, comforting images of Jesus ... but do they really belong in the middle of Easter season?

All that being said, I know what I am not confused about. I am not confused about the Resurrection. And, I am not confused by the last line of the gospel reading, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” ... especially during this COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic crisis.

We are in the season of Easter ... the season of Resurrection ... of new life given us by God. We are also in the season of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Each of our lives has been disrupted ... in one way or another ... by this disease. Over three million people around the world are fighting COVID-19 ... over one million in this country alone. Sixty-five thousand people in this country have already died. I learned this week of a high school classmate of mine who died of COVID-19. I imagine there are others in the congregation who know of friends or relatives ... or friends of relatives ... who have died of COVID-19. Each loss is more than just a statistic ... these are persons with families and friends who are grieving.

I mourn with those families that mourn. I am grieving that they couldn’t hold the hand of their father, or sister, or husband in their last moments of life. Families filled with sorrow and pain cannot find even a semblance of closure because they cannot gather in person. The Right Reverend Mark Hollingsworth, Bishop of the Diocese of Ohio, lost his father-in-law on Good Friday ... but they have yet to be able to plan for a funeral.

And, then there are the doctors, and nurses, and healthcare workers of all sorts that are risking their lives as they try to save the lives of strangers. Not only is their physical health at risk, but so is their mental and spiritual health.

Thirty million in this country are now unemployed. And, many of those at the very bottom of the economic ladder are faced with the difficult choice of going to work under very risky circumstances, or no job at all. For many, the economic effects of this crisis are almost as bad as the loss of life.

We see the effects of this pandemic all around us ... and it even effects this tiny community of St. Cyprian's. We cannot meet as a congregation. We cannot share a holy meal together. If we happen to see one another, it is at a distance of six feet ... with a mask on.

Yet, I believe that there is new life available for each of us, for this congregation, for this city, for this country, and for the entire world.

The reality of the Resurrection ... this "newness" ... can be witnessed every single day. If the Resurrection means anything at all it means that God takes what is broken, discarded, given up for loss, and left without hope ... and God raises it up, proclaims its divine value, and gives it once more to us to be treasured. Over and over again, God does this with our households and our families, with those whom we love and those whom we despise, with those who care for us and those who would cause us harm. And, God does this with the Church as a whole, and even with congregations such as St. Cyprian's, and cities such as St. Augustine. God yearns to do it with all of us in every aspect of our lives. God is calling us and leading us into "newness" ... into new life ... a new life of abundance. That is the unimaginable depth of God's love.

The Resurrection of Jesus occurred 2,000 years ago. However, if we concretize the event it becomes nothing more than a litmus test of our faith ... either you believe that the Resurrection literally happened, or you don't. However, I believe the Resurrection is much more than that. It is a process of living through a painful death of a way of life, and sitting in the grief of that loss for a figurative "three days." That figurative "three days" may be a literal three days, or three months, or three years, or even three decades ... just ask anyone recovering from an addiction. And, when the Resurrection happens, it is not a return to life like it was before whatever death we have experienced ... it is a new life. That new life may be uncomfortable at first ... it is different than the familiar old life ... yet that resurrected, new life is full of abundance.

Each of us knows how easy it is to feel defeated by fear, loneliness, or despair ... by illness, pain, or sorrow. We have all been physically isolated in one way or another by the "safer-at-home" orders. Yet, I think each of us also knows how easy it is to feel isolated by pride, self-pity, or envy ... by hatred, resentment, or helplessness. Each of us knows how easy it is to feel overwhelmed by any of the things the power of evil heaps against us to separate us from each other ... and from the love of God. However, nothing is lost to God. When we give any one of these emotions or realities of our lives to God, even the things we are most ashamed of ... or most afraid of ... or most protective of ... God raises it up, embraces it with the blessing of new possibility, and gives it back to us with transcendent potential for abundant life.

All this happens not because of us, but because of God. Not because we deserve it or earn it,

but simply and only because God loves us. As God has done with the body of Jesus, so God does with you and with me. No matter who we are and what we have become, God raises us to God's self, kisses us with new life, and gives us back to the world that we might feed it with love. That is the resurrection of the body ... Jesus' body ... our bodies ... and the Church as the Body of Christ.

So, in the midst of this season of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, I encourage you to remember God's divine understanding, fidelity, and immeasurable love. Remember this congregation of St. Cyprian's, and this City of St. Augustine. And, most of all, remember that in Jesus' resurrection, you and I are gathered, blessed, and returned to the world in newness of life ... "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"

I will confess that even with Joe and Melanie Sampson's help, I am still rather confused by Good Shepherd Sunday ... especially when Jesus uses the metaphor of a **gate** to describe his role in our lives. But, what I am not confused about is the Resurrection ... and I am not confused by the promise of abundant life that Resurrection brings.

Amen.