

## Fourth Sunday of the Resurrection The Divine Shepherd

Acts 4:5-12; Ps 23; 1 Jn 3:16-24; Jn 10:11-18

If you haven't guessed by our lectionary readings, the "Fourth Sunday of Easter" is always: "Good Shepherd Sunday." We have the comforting words from Psalm 23 depicting God as the Divine Shepherd who protects and comforts his flock in times of uncertainty or danger. And, we have our gospel passage where Jesus says that he *is* the "Good Shepherd," the one who is not just willing to lay down his life, but the one who explicitly does: "*lay down his life*" for his flock.

Jesus tells us he *is* the Divine Shepherd and we, his disciples, are his "sheep." The good news is that he loves all of his sheep—the wise, the foolish; the vain, the humble; the kind, the cruel; the generous, the parsimonious; the brave, the timid; the worthy and, yes, even the unworthy. Jesus says he loves all of his sheep. Jesus loves you. And, if we are His sheep then we also know Him. Our reading from First John reminds us that we are to believe in, to trust in, Jesus and we are to follow his last command to: "*love one another*" because (for those of us who believe in Jesus) God now literally "abides" or "Dwells" *in* us.....just as we now abide in God.

That also means that we too must proclaim the Kingdom of God, just as the first Christians did! They did not just gather once a week to "*break the bread and drink the wine*" and to "talk about" Jesus.[1 Cor 11.23ff] They proceeded to tell everyone that Jesus was the Messiah of God, the true Son of God, the Living God, and that he willingly "*laid down his life*" for us, the worthy and the unworthy! He willingly allowed himself to be put to death. And this they proclaimed to everyone near and far that this same Jesus who died, God also raised from the dead ...to never die again.

This is the Easter Message, not only for those of us inside the church, but also for those outside of it, that: Jesus truly died. He willingly died for us, by laying down his life for all humanity. He died for us. And God, who then raised Jesus from the dead, vindicated every promise Jesus made. The Resurrection makes Jesus eternally *available to all humanity*. That means the Good Shepherd loves us and is always with us, no matter what. This is what we call: "Redemption," our removal from confinement to sin and death by the gracious act of Jesus' self-offering, who now stands alongside us through all of our trials and tribulations.

Moreover, Jesus promised that those who believed *Him*, trusted *in Him*, that they too would never die, that He would *abide in* all those who followed him and that we should imitate him by our love for one another.

This is the essence of what Peter so powerfully testified to with the Jewish leaders in today's reading from Acts. Today's passage begins with the phrase: "*The next day...*". Well, the next day after what? The day after Peter and John had been arrested and put in prison for proclaiming the Easter message of: "*This Jesus Christ whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead.*"[4.10] They spent the night in prison because of what they were saying: "*and Many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.*"[4.4]

So, that "next" day, Peter and John are brought before the Jewish leadership and asked: "*By what power or by what name did you (heal that lame man)?*"[4.7] Peter affirms that God healed the man.

Peter says that just as God healed the lame man, so also did God raise Jesus from the dead and that deliverance is available only from God.

Peter used this “healing event” to speak to the reality that we are all sick, we are all ill, not just with medical ailments, which can separate us from physical and emotional wholeness, but we are sick with “sin,” which separates from God. Peter then boldly proclaims that “*There is salvation (there is healing, there is deliverance, there is restoration) ....there is salvation in no one else (but Jesus), for there is no other name...by which we must be saved.*” [4.12] In other words, what was true of the lame man is also true of the vindication, the deliverance, the healing, the restoration of our relationship with God.

The healing of the lame man was far more than just the healing of a physical condition. It was a healing and restoration to community and to a wholeness of life—“life” as God intends life to be lived. Through the power of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who loves all members of his flock, the healing was an act of compassion and love. There is no mention of whether the “lame man” was a good man or a bad man, whether he “believed in” Jesus or if he even knew who Jesus was. The healing itself was a “sign” of Christ, the Divine Shepherd’s *continuing* presence, and the healing restoration that he brings into the world.

The Good Shepherd does not promise to “solve all of our problems,” or to prevent calamity and heartache in our lives. Parents know they cannot “tie their child’s shoelaces” every day or the child will never learn this necessary skill. Parents cannot prevent every fall, for how can the child learn to stand. Parents cannot prevent every failure, for how will the child learn to “rise up” from defeat? But that does not mean that the parent is absent or uncaring. The parents are always there, even when the child is “unaware.”

So too the Good Shepherd. The Resurrection allows the Divine Shepherd to be present to us always. And we can come most close to that Divine, Good Shepherd when we come in faithfulness, to his last command to: “love one another.” Loving others is our opportunity to come and to offer ourselves to Christ for guidance, comfort, affirmation, strength, or solace. We reach out our fragile love to others, just as the Good Shepherd placed his life into our hands, with no guarantee of gratitude or reciprocation, merely in the hope that we too will love our fellow man—the vain, the foolish, the willful, the prideful, the angry, the lost; for they too are loved by the Good Shepherd.

Jesus, the Divine Shepherd, laid down his life for his sheep. He died, saying, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” And all he asks is that we turn to our fellow man—whomever they may be and say the same: “I love you, I love you, I love you.” ....

For that is what it *means* to: “ *dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*” [Ps23:6b]

***“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.” Ps 23:1***