



April 25, 2021, Worship Sermon
" Good Shepherd"
Delivered by Rev. Stephen Keiser

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

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit abide in you.

This is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday. Today we praise Christ who laid down his life for his sheep, who coming to earth as one of us conquered death so that we may know life and know freedom and know it abundantly.

The earliest images of Christ that archeologists have been able to find are fresco paintings from the 3rd Century, only about a hundred or so years after Jesus lived. They don't depict the cross. Early Christians did not associate the cross with Jesus. The artists of the day, still trying to understand who Jesus was, depicted him as a shepherd. The image is young. He doesn't have a beard. He has a lamb draped over his shoulder, but no flowing robes. It's a very earthy depiction, not really mystical at all. These images were commonly found in catacombs. These were times of persecution and the good shepherd was considered a safe way to represent that a person was a follower of Christ without causing any suspicion. But they were also a way to represent the promise of Christ, or what the presence of Christ meant to them: life, guidance, and protection even in the darkest of places.

It's fascinating how we develop these ideas of who Christ is, what Christ looks like. We wait on the Lord, but we don't know when we will see Christ again, so we look for Christ in one another and in ourselves.

I will give you an example: Bernie McNeilly. My grandmother. Grandmothers are so important. So often they bring a kind of standard of love and goodness that just benefits from having been on the earth a bit longer and having that love tempered and seasoned by experience. I know that's not universal, but it sure happens a lot. My grandmother passed away this week.

Bernie, who the grandkids called Nonnie, was full of personality. And she always was. She was willful and ornery and independent and blunt and fierce. She grew up during the depression and like so many people of that generation, she was made of steel. But she was also full of charisma. People just gravitated to her. She had this sharp wit and this wonderful, infectious laugh that invited you in on the joke. She loved to be the center of attention and she loved to be involved. She was the grand matriarch of Tahiti Lane in Memphis, TN where she lived since 1952 when they bought that house brand new. If anyone in that neighborhood needed something, they were as likely to go to Ms Bernie as anyone else. Marital issues, go see Bernie. Somebody in trouble, better go see Ms Bernie. Someone needs to get sober, let's go talk to Bernie. She was a servant in the most remarkable ways, but a servant that was just as likely to, as she would say, "jerk a not in your tail" if you stayed too far from what she knew was right. But she was also savvy. When my Mom started dating guys from the Navy and the Marines—you know those guys travel in packs—Bernie very wisely invited them in, fed them, and made them her fast friends (that's where my

Dad came from).

My grandfather was a patient man. In fact, despite the chaos of my grandmother, three daughters and the neighborhood stopping in, he was as cool as the other side of the pillow. And for me, my brother, my cousin, they gave us a place of rest, a place of love and trust and peace away from our home lives. My grandparents shepherded me through some very difficult days. And for all her bluster, they always understood the value of just being quiet with someone, letting them be, feeding them and listening to them.

I know this congregation has experienced loss. I never want to diminish that. I never want to compare it to anything. My hope is that by sharing my story, you will hear things that you connect with, traits that you recognize in loved ones that bring happy memories to you of shepherds in your life. I truly believe that in these stories, what we share is a humanity, a connection created in the image of God that is true and good.

This congregation is full of brilliant, beautiful, beloved children of God. The love and trust that I have witnessed between people here, I just know that what I see here is people finding ways to shepherd one another through life, finding the Christ within themselves and bringing it out in the very best ways, by serving one another. We all need shepherding from time to time.

What I do want to say is that the light of Christ, the light of our eternal and loving God is within you. And the shepherd that Christ is, the one true shepherd, the shepherd that is always faithful, the shepherd who knows his flock and whose voice his flock always recognizes, that strength and guidance is within us. We can't be what Christ is. We cannot be shepherds in every moment or to the same vast depth and commitment. After all, we are the flock, but when we give each other the dignity and love that comes from our understanding of Christ inside us, that is strength and light that extends to others, that heals, that finds the lost, that lifts up a neighbor, that consoles grief.

The Psalm this week is perhaps too familiar to many folks, for good reasons, but it's a well-worn passage. Psalm 23. I'm going to read it and I would like you to meditate on it with me, try to hear it as though you've never heard it before. And as you listen, think about the shepherds in your life, the people who bring you closer to Christ and closer to understanding the grace in your own heart.

Psalm 23

1The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not be in want.

***2The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures
and leads me beside still waters.***

3You restore my soul, O Lord,

and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake.

***4Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall not fear evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. R***

5You prepare a table before me in the presence / of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is / running over.

6Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days / of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the / Lord forever.

Amen.

When I was a young adult, I attended University Lutheran Church in West Philadelphia. At that time, Unilu, as we called it, was somewhat high church. In every worship service, there would be processions with the cross and candles. The pastor would chant many of the prayers. And on festivals, like Christmas and Easter, there would be incense. I remember one Easter, a student at Penn named Scott was the thurifer. The thurifer is the person who carries the container of incense and waves it over the altar or over the congregation as a way of blessing the gathering with the sweet fragrance of God's presence. Scott was, perhaps, a bit overly enthusiastic in his role as thurifer that Easter morning. As the organist was playing the prelude, he loaded a lot of incense into the thurible, the silver container that held the charcoal and incense. Then, when the congregation stood up to sing the opening hymn, "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today," Scott led the procession into the sanctuary. Since it was Easter, the church was packed and there were lots of people in the choir. In addition to the organ, there were trumpets and kettle drums, so the volume of the music made the stained-glass windows rattle. It was so thrilling that even the most jaded skeptic would want to believe that the resurrection must be true. Scott led the procession around the perimeter of the sanctuary waving the thurible back and forth and then, when he started up the center aisle, he began to do loop the loops with the thurible. Nobody had ever tried this before and it was really spectacular. With each spin, wafts of incense came pouring out of the thurible. Once he got to the altar, he continued to stand in front of the congregation, spinning the thurible around and around while we sang all four verses of the Easter hymn. I was the usher that Sunday, so I stood in the back and watched as the smoke of incense filled the sanctuary. The smoke was so thick, I could barely see the altar. Now I like incense, but my feelings about it changed that morning, because by the end of the opening hymn, quite a few worshippers were fleeing the sanctuary with their hands over their necks, choking and coughing, tears streaming down their faces. It wasn't quite the Easter that Scott had been preparing for.

The memory of those worshippers fleeing the sanctuary on that Easter morning comes to mind as I read the Gospel of Mark's version of the resurrection story. In Mark's Gospel, the women come to the tomb prepared with their own version of incense. They come to the tomb prepared to overcome the stench of death with the sweet-smelling fragrance of the spices they brought to anoint Jesus' body. Their plans are interrupted though, as they discover the tomb is empty and this strange messenger tells them that Jesus has been raised from death. The women flee the tomb, so choked with terror that they are unable to speak a word about what they saw. It wasn't quite the Easter they had been preparing for.

Once every three years, we hear Mark's version of the resurrection story, and every time we read it I kind of feel like I ought to offer an apology. We gather on Easter, whether in-person or online, because we want to hear some good news; and instead Mark offers us this quirky story about women fleeing the tomb in terror. It's not the story most of us had been preparing for.

Mark's resurrection account may not be quite what we had been preparing for, but it contains a profound truth none-the-less. New Testament scholar, Esau McCaulley, puts it this way: "Mark's ending points to a truth that often gets lost in the celebration: Easter is a frightening prospect. For the women, the only thing more terrifying than a world with Jesus dead was one in which he was alive."

McCaulley goes on to explain that Easter is frightening because it confronts us with the unsettling presence of a God who is able to bring life out of death. And we're not talking about zombies or the walking dead. Remember, when the Bible talks about death, it's not talking primarily about the cessation of a heartbeat. In the Bible, death manifests itself in the destruction of relationships. Death manifests itself in slavery and injustice and violence, in the breakdown of society, in despair and meaninglessness. Easter is frightening because it confronts us with the unsettling presence of a God who refuses to allow death to have the final word. And if death doesn't have the final word, we are forced to live in hope.

This year, it has been especially easy to recognize the power of death. Between the pandemic, the mass shootings, the racially inspired violence, and the social isolation, we are all too well prepared to face death. Like the women at the tomb, we expect to encounter it and we will try our best to mask its stench with our platitudes and justifications. But God says no to our resignation. God says no to our acceptance of death and God says yes to life. God turns us around and sends us back to Galilee with the promise that there we will meet the Lord of life, the living savior.

Galilee is where Jesus conducted almost his entire ministry. Galilee is where Jesus healed the sick and fed the five thousand and cast out demons. In other words, Galilee is where Jesus gave life to those who were perishing. Go to Galilee, the young man at the tomb tells the disciples, and continue doing the things that Jesus taught you do. Heal the sick; cleanse the leper; give food to the hungry; and you will see the risen Christ there, as you continue his ministry.

It may seem strange to end the Gospel with the women fleeing in terror from the tomb. But truth be told, this is not the end of the Gospel. It may be the end of the book we call the Gospel of Mark, but it is not the end of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, the book we call the Gospel of Mark is only the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Jesus Christ continues as the disciples continue to demonstrate the power of God to bring life out of death. The Gospel of Jesus Christ continues to this very day.

Many of you have helped me to see the continuing Gospel of Jesus Christ as the life-giving power of God is demonstrated in your own lives and in this community. In the meals that you help distribute on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, the risen Christ continues the miracle of feeding the five thousand. In your recovery from addiction, I see the risen Christ continuing to liberate from bondage. In the love that you share with those who are going through difficult times, I see the risen Christ continuing his ministry of compassion.

Go to that little neighborhood of Galilee that we call Upper Darby, and you will see the risen Christ there.