

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC    May 3, 2020 - Streaming Mass**  
**Easter 4th Sunday of Year A    John 10:1-10**

I don't know much about shepherds, and I know even less about sheep. But this little story might show how one can be a kind of shepherd even in New York City. Before I arrived at St. Thomas More, I was pastor of St. Peter's Church in lower Manhattan, just around the corner from the World Trade Center, and was present there during the attack on 9/11. A few weeks after that terrible day a parishioner told me a story of what she had experienced. She was a single woman who lived in Battery Park City, just across the street from the World Trade Center. When the Towers collapsed, large chunks of metal went shooting across the street, some gouging the eastern façade of her building, causing considerable damage to many of the apartments. At the time her elderly parents were staying with her, having come from Florida for a visit. After the attack there was no electricity in her building, cell phones were not working, the elevator was not operative either—and she lived on the seventeenth floor—and most of the residents had fled the building. She said she never felt so alone in her life. She walked down the seventeen flights hoping she might find someone who could tell her what she might do. When she arrived in the lobby, she saw no one but the familiar doorman, who was still at his customary post. She was quite frantic and told him her plight. He assured her that she need not worry; he had a list of all the residents who were still in the building; and when the electricity was turned on, he would come for her and her parents, and escort them to safety. That doorman was like the Good Shepherd who does not abandon his flock---in this case, the residents of the building. He knew each by name and would them out. In short, he took care of them when they felt abandoned and alone.

This image Jesus gives us of Himself as the Good Shepherd has always been a source of strength and consolation for Christians down through the ages. We today are so familiar with the crucifix as the chief symbol of our faith, that is hard for us to conceive that in the early days of the Church's existence, the crucifix was not present at all it in any place where Christians were accustomed to worship. While crucifixion was still employed as a particularly grisly form of capital punishment, it was still too stark, too brutal a reminder of Jesus' death. Jesus was portrayed most often as the Good Shepherd.

The earliest sculpture depicting Jesus that archaeologists have discovered, is that of a young man, a shepherd with a sheep over his shoulders, keeping the front and hind legs of the sheep secure with his hands. This was the way that any shepherd would carry a wounded sheet in from the hillside to take care of it. More striking, still,

is that at this very early stage in the church's development, at a time when there were no statues used in the Christian places of worship, the only ornamentation being frescoes painted on the walls and ceilings—because of a sensitivity to the Old Testament prohibition of graven images, and because of a fear of lapsing into the idolatry of the pagans—the only freestanding image they used was that of Christ as the Good Shepherd. And, when the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd was placed alongside frescos depicting the Resurrection, the notion being conveyed was that of Christ carrying the souls of the just into eternal life, just as the shepherd carried the wounded sheep back to a place of safety.

It is the theme of life, of support, of care, of protection, of tenderness that the image of the Good Shepherd communicates. It's made clear in the words of Jesus in today's Gospel, "I came that [you] may have life and have it more abundantly." It is the image of a warm, accepting, loving shepherd taking care of all his sheep, no matter where or how they have strayed, carrying them home on his shoulders, if need be, that Jesus is trying to communicate. That's the sense the first generation of Christians captured in their depictions of the Good Shepherd.

Way back in the third century, an early Christian writer penned these words. St. Irenaeus wrote, "The glory of God is the human being who was fully alive." This is the central message of Jesus. He has come not to condemn or judge, but to save us—perhaps, at times, to save us from ourselves—but always to save us, not to indict us. Let us pray that we can see where His message and example of a generous, accepting, unconditional love can support us today, and make His presence more real in our lives—where it can touch our relationships, our dealings with people, even our attitudes towards ourselves, particularly those parts of ourselves we prefer not to have to look at. Let us think of ways that we can support one another, just as He continues to support us. Then, may all that is good within us come to fulfillment, so that we may know and feel the Shepherd's presence even in the dark valley that we are passing through at this time, so that His goodness and kindness may follow us all days of our lives, and that we may dwell in the house the Lord for years to come.