

## **The 4th Sunday of Easter -- May 3, 2020**

The Sundays of the Easter season so far have presented us with accounts of the appearance of the risen Jesus. The purpose of the Church in presenting us with those accounts of the risen Christ's appearances to various persons and groups of the early Church is to remind us and to deepen our understanding that the Jesus who suffered and died through the horrible experience of crucifixion is now risen and among us again in a new and powerful way.

The hope of the Church is that we will more deeply understand that the resurrection of Jesus is not just a past event but that the Jesus we receive in communion at Mass and experience in the other sacraments and in our life is the died and risen Christ.

The hope of the Church is that we might understand more deeply that this Jesus who entered completely and fully into the reality of all human suffering and death and who though without sin bore the terrible effects of all the world's sin – past, present and future – and who remained united with us in our sins – has once and for all overcome all sin and death. (St. Peter reminds us this in today's first reading – “This Jesus whom you crucified has been raised up by God.”)

The Church hopes that we will grow in our understanding that the victory over sin and death that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection has been shared with us, and that all the baptized have been given a share in this victory and already have a share in eternal life. (In the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today, St. Peter tells us that “Christ has left us an example that we should follow in his footsteps and that he is now the shepherd and guardian of our souls.”)

These words of St. Peter are the concern of the readings of this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter which is also called Good Shepherd Sunday.

In the Old Testament – God promised that after the failures of the human shepherds that he had appointed over his people, he himself would come and shepherd his people. Can we see how his is now doing that in

Christ who tells us that he is the Good Shepherd and the Gate, the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

It may look like our Gospel had gone backwards in time from Jesus' resurrection as it shares with us a teaching from his time of ministry. However, in this teaching Jesus is actually telling us how to connect and remain connected with him in his new risen presence and action among us today.

We are always concerned about knowing and following the will of God as we go through the everyday ups and downs of human life, but especially in times of difficulty or crises times like these stressful and difficult days we do seek to know and carry out God's will and to have his help and guidance. So today's Gospel is quite timely for us as Jesus speaks quite directly to our concerns to know his will and to have his protection.

He uses a very familiar example of his day and one that we can understand yet today.

In the time of Jesus and still some today in Israel there were many farmers who raised flocks of sheep and goats for their wool and milk and meat. During the day these shepherds would lead their flocks through the hills desert areas to graze for food. At night they would bring their flocks together in a penned-off area or caves where they would be sheltered from storms and protected against thieves and wild animals.

After they brought them into these areas, one shepherd would stand guard through the night at the gate where they went in and out. Often this gate-keeper would literally lay himself across the opening as the gate to keep the flock in the pen and to protect the flocks. It was at times a very dangerous job.

In the morning, the other shepherds would come to get their flock and lead them out to graze again for the day. Even though there were many different flocks in the enclosure, every sheep or goat in the flock would go out and follow only the shepherd that was theirs because they knew him and his voice and he knew

them after caring for them day after day and even had names for each and knew them by name.

Using this image, Jesus is telling us that as we journey through life today he is with us always and knows not only our names but all of our needs and all the details of our life – and he is saying that he is our protector who still today is laying down his life for each of us to keep us from all persons and things that might try to steal or take away the new and eternal life and communion we have with God and each other that we have received. -- He is telling us that if we have been listening and following him we know him and his voice just as he knows us.

Jesus is telling us that he is the gate into the Kingdom of God and eternal life and that if we enter through him we will have his protection from those who would lead us astray. Others come only to steal and destroy, but he has come and remains with us that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

What a promise and assurance! God himself in Jesus is always with us and shepherding us.

In what ways do we hear his voice today? What does his voice sound like? We need to know and follow his voice as there are many things that give us the feeling of being fully alive, yet all these do not add up to the kind of fullness that Jesus wants to give us.

Many of us adults can identify times when we have felt like sheep without a shepherd when we were confused about our calling, or when things did not work out as we hoped in our job or marriage or other commitment or when we were caught up in some sinful pattern of behavior. We know about being misled by others and the difficulty in discerning God's voice in making important decisions. However, the voice of a teacher, parent or counselor can be remembered as the voice of Jesus who leads us to peaceful waters.

Teens know what is to recognize the voice of their friends on the phone. How easy is for them to also recognize Jesus' voice and what might it sound like and what might he be saying to them?

Children can relate to today's Gospel as they know how their pets recognize them and their voices and very much enjoy thinking of Jesus using their names when he talks to them.

Today, in the Gospel it seems that there are Pharisees or religious leaders to whom Jesus may be giving some correction in their leadership. But as the wonderful reflection for today in Word Among Us says, we can also learn something for ourselves as well from today's Gospel

We are all shepherds for God's people in one way or another. Our flock may be our children, our parents, our neighbors, our classes, or co-workers. But no matter who is in our flock, we need to remember that the sheep belong to Jesus and not to us. He is deeply concerned for each of them and wants us to reflect his own love and self-sacrifice for them.

So we might ask ourselves today --- "How well do we know our sheep? Do we know the names of our co-workers or our fellow parishioners (this is something we have been talking about recently)? Do I know the challenges and difficulties those around me are facing? Sometimes we are so busy with our own affairs that we overlook the hurt, tiredness, or fears in someone right next to us. But following the example of Jesus we can set aside our concerns, "call them by name" and listen to their needs. Perhaps we can even lead them to a place of peace. That's one way that we too can be a shepherd for God's sheep.