

## Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter

### “The Good Shepherd”

John 10:11-18

4/22/18b

<sup>11</sup> “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd **gives His life for the sheep.** <sup>12</sup> But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. <sup>15</sup> As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and **I lay down My life for the sheep.** <sup>16</sup> And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

<sup>17</sup> “Therefore My Father loves Me, because **I lay down My life that I may take it again.** <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from Me, but **I lay it down of Myself.** I have **power to lay it down,** and I have **power to take it again.** This command I have received from My Father.”

For three Sundays running we’ve heard readings from the Gospels that have dealt with Jesus’ resurrection. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, Easter Sunday, we heard about the women meeting God’s angel at the empty tomb; the Second Sunday of Easter we heard about Jesus’ Sunday evening appearances to the fearful disciples and the peace Jesus gave to them, including Thomas; last Sunday we heard of Jesus’ opening His disciples minds to understand the Scriptures, and His pronouncing them His witnesses, witnesses of His resurrection. Now, though, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, today’s Gospel reading, instead of supplying us with another post-resurrection appearance, actually takes us back—back to the period of time before Good Friday and Easter, that is, before Jesus Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Yet it’s not that hard to see how a reading like this fits during the Easter season, and why it is appointed to be read on this Fourth Sunday of Easter. For here in John 10 we listen to

Jesus as He speaks—before the fact—about the stuff of this season! Jesus speaks about both His death on the cross and also His resurrection from the dead! His death Jesus calls “giving” and “laying down” His life. The dying He mentions five times in our text, and the rising (which He calls “taking His life again”) twice. So His cross and empty tomb are really Jesus’ emphases in these verses from John 10. Couldn’t fit better in this Easter season.

And it’s all set within the context of Jesus calling Himself the good shepherd, isn’t it?

I am the good shepherd, Jesus says. And He elaborates: The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. Now, I want to tell you three words in that sentence which are very important: **for the sheep**. For the sheep—so you remember it would you repeat that after me? [For the sheep.]

Jesus doesn’t just say He gives His life. He says He gives His life *for the sheep*. Now Jesus wasn’t employed literally as a shepherd; the language is figurative. Likewise the word “sheep”—it means people, human creatures. Jesus wanted to say that His death on the cross would be a death that would benefit people. It would benefit people helplessly separated from their Creator by their sin. It would be a death to restore those people to relationship with their Creator again. It would be a death *in their place*—so that they would not perish, but through faith in Christ gain everlasting life.

The New Testament affirms that it all really happened just as Jesus foretold. “Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead”—Peter’s Spirit-filled affirmation which we heard earlier couldn’t have been more clear (Acts 4:10). And Peter added: “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (v.12)

And the good news on this Sunday morning is that whoever you are, Jesus died and rose for you. He came to earth, the Son of God in human flesh, to be the good shepherd, the good shepherd *for you*.

Jesus' words here at the start of our text have long been one of my favorite Bible verses, a "go to" verse for me. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). The Gospel simply and beautifully stated.

As often as I really ponder this reality and take it in—and especially if I will first reflect honestly on my guilt in the light of God's Law—I feel enormously grateful, and greatly comforted by these words of Jesus.

You can be comforted too, and grateful.

An old Christian song of praise to Jesus, a simple and familiar hymn, is "Oh, How I Love Jesus". The words say, "Oh, how I love Jesus! Oh, how I love Jesus! Oh, how I love Jesus because He first loved me!" Christians love Jesus because He loved us when we were unlovable. He died for sinners like us, and rose again with free salvation to share with us through the Gospel.

And you know, we're not the only ones who love Jesus because He laid down His life and took it up again. Jesus in our text says that His Father loves Him for the same reason: "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again" (v.17).

God the Father certainly loves His only-begotten Son, Jesus, completely and perfectly, simply because He is His Son. But also specifically and in particular, God loves His Son because Jesus died on the cross and rose again. Not meaning, of course, that the Son died *for* the Father, as though the Father were a sinner like us and needed redemption. No, but the meaning is that the Father had delight in what Jesus was willing to do to save *us*. You see, God the Father, our Creator, still loved us even though we had fallen into sin and shame, rebellion and wicked ways.

The Father still loved us. He desired that His Son should become man to call men to repentance and redeem us through bloody death and a cross. And the Father loves His Son Jesus because Jesus was willing.

This truth that Jesus teaches in our text can bring you double comfort, then, for it assures you that you are loved by the Lord Jesus and by His Father as well. The Holy Spirit, sent forth from the Father and the Son, through the Word this morning brings that comforting truth home to your heart that you may believe it for your very own. Note that our text says nothing about the worthiness of the sheep of Jesus' flock, for they were not. The good shepherd died for them precisely because they were unworthy, because they were sinners. So hear, and take heart.

You know, Good Shepherd Sunday, as this Fourth Sunday of Easter is known, is a wonderful time to be reminded about some important things. The shepherd and sheep imagery reminds us that we resemble sheep. We resemble sheep in that we, God's human creatures, are dependent (although we so often foolishly think otherwise). We resemble sheep in that we are spiritually apt to wander and follow our noses toward greener pastures, even though we never had it so good as with the pastures in which God sets us. We resemble sheep in that we are vulnerable—to Satan, to false teachers and false doctrine, and to many other dangers of which we're so often unaware.

Lots of similarities, sobering ones—yet the good news that always comes home to us as we read the Bible is that in the midst of our miserable and pitiful “sheeply” needs we have precisely what we need...we have precisely *Whom* we need...we have the good shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Knowing the *presence* of Jesus is comforting. He is certainly the one who is “with us...even...through the valley of the shadow of death,” as the psalm says. But make sure to go *deeper*. What is at the heart of our shepherd's goodness toward us is what He did for us on the *cross*. Again, pay attention to our text. Our text, with Jesus' stress upon laying

down and taking up His life, certainly leaves the impression that Jesus' death for us and His resurrection are what Jesus wants us ever to focus upon and draw comfort from. Our good shepherd, Jesus, gave His life, voluntarily laid it down (it was not His enemies overpowering Him and having their way with Him; no, He let it all happen, or it couldn't have happened)... And He did that **for the sheep** (remember that phrase?) That is to say, He did it for us.

Plus, He rose again. Actually, the death would have been no victory at all if Jesus stayed dead. But He didn't. Jesus rose, Jesus lives. Alleluia! Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

→so that Good Shepherd Sunday each Easter season is not the consideration of things that sure would be nice if they were really true, but it is the consideration and celebration of things that *really are true*.

By grace we get to be, right now, wherever we are in life, whatever our sadness, brokenness, pain, or loss, we get to be part of the flock—that one flock—of the one true good shepherd, Jesus. I can't think of a better community to belong to. Cutting through the din and clamor of the voices shouting at us in this sin-filled world, we, Christ's flock, get to hear the soothing tones of Jesus' voice in His Word, promising us life and salvation forever. In the midst of whatever is vexing us (and there is always so much) we get to be reminded that Jesus (unlike the "hireling" mentioned in the text) really and truly cares about us. He will never turn tail and run; He will never forsake us. He knows us (v.14), His sheep, and He knows the plans that He has for us.

Day by day: He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

He restores my soul; He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies... My cup overflows.

(Excerpts from Psalm 23)

So, as this new week unfolds with its unknowns, one thing we can say for certain, we who have been baptized into Christ, into our Savior's death and resurrection, one thing we can say for certain is that we are sheep of the good shepherd. We are Jesus' flock and He is our shepherd.

Remember that this week. Consider at day's beginning and at day's end what God's grace and your shepherd's sacrifice mean for you...what His resurrection victory means for you: that you are one whose sins have been completely forgiven, you are one whose guilt has been entirely and eternally removed, by the good shepherd who laid down His life—and didn't just lay it down, but laid it down *for you*. Consider throughout the hours of the day that this good shepherd, far from being a wishful fancy or figment of your imagination, is real, and risen; He is living, and reigning.

Think on the very real *formerly* lame man healed in Acts chapter three, that “helpless man” whom Peter and John healed—not because of their own power or godliness, but through the powerful name of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. What wondrous works are done through the name of Jesus, by faith in Him—as all creation will witness on the Day when Christ returns in glory and your faith in Him is vindicated before all!

Yes, the sheep of the Lord's pasture—sheep like you and me—fare well...even when wolves growl and howl, even when Satan and death itself menace and threaten.

Our Jesus lives!

And this Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

And surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Amen