

Rev. Heather Apel – Indiana-Kentucky Synod, ELCA
May 8, 2022 – 4th Sunday of Easter
John 10:22-30; Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43

Grace, mercy and peace be to you through God, the Father, and our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. Amen.

This week is often referred to as the Good Shepherd Sunday due to the appointed passages of scripture. This city girl doesn't know very much about sheep or shepherds, but I do know that Psalm 23 (the selected Psalm for today) is one of the most beloved and well-known passages of scripture. Often in the church we hear this read at funeral or memorial services. For a moment I thought it would be neat to preach on that text since this morning isn't a funeral service, and I could look at it from a different perspective. Then I read the passage from Acts, and said, "Well, nevermind!"

Because it was the story from Acts that caught my attention this week, particularly the actions of the widows who were there when Peter arrives. After Tabitha/Dorcas dies, it says that the widows, "...stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them..." What an unusual detail to include in this text. But then the more I thought about it, it began to make sense.

These women try and show Peter what Tabitha meant to them and their community, by showing the concrete evidence of her being a woman devoted to good works and acts of charity, as it states in v. 36. This was their attempt to honor Tabitha's memory and the impact she made in their lives. In the deep grief and loss over their friend, they seek to show how much she meant to them and how she had touched their lives.

And if we think about it, not much has changed, as we do the same thing in our culture – displaying pictures or mementos of loved ones who die, telling stories of how they touched us, and gathering together to remember their life among us.

But in this text, death is not the end of the story (which is what we're essentially celebrating throughout the whole Easter season and any time we gather to give thanks and praise to God). Peter is able to bring her back from the dead – to give her new life. And this was great for the community, who would now be able to experience more of her good works and acts of charity, but even better for Tabitha, who had another opportunity to live.

Isn't that what we all want at some point or another in life – the chance for a new start, the opportunity to have a “do over” – to erase whatever past mistakes and failings have occurred, and be able to begin anew, with a clean fresh slate, or even just a chance to have more time to keep on doing what we're doing now. In this case it was literally an opportunity for a new life, as Tabitha was brought back from the dead – but you can probably think of many moments in life that feel like a death – times of sickness and suffering, job loss and financial burdens, times of loneliness and isolation, moments of uncertainty, a 2+ year pandemic, or any number of other situations in which we want to have a little resurrection take place – times when we want to open our eyes and see new life around us.

New life – resurrected life – is what Jesus offers us – it just may not always show up in the ways that we are expecting, because it begins in the waters of baptism and comes to us daily through the Holy Spirit. There are many voices in this world that try and tell us what we need to achieve this new life, such as what we need to do to earn our self worth, or what kind of ladder we must climb in order to establish ourselves and our status in this world. There are even some voices that claim to speak for God, and declare that the only true way to gain this new life and salvation is by following a prescribed set of rules and religious experiences, or by

believing in a certain set of doctrines or achieving a higher level of scriptural and theological knowledge.

The major flaw in all of these claims – and the other voices of the world that try and drown out the voice of the Good Shepherd – is that they imply that it's all up to us to accomplish these things. When, in fact, quite the opposite is true. Those who belong to Jesus, who hear and recognize his voice and follow him, have been given to him by the Father (10:29). Everything depends on God's initiative – even our ability to be baptized is possible only because God has already claimed us as God's children, and the washing at the font is the outward sign, declaration and receipt of God's promise of salvation. God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17). We have been given the promise and gift of eternal life through the Good Shepherd, and no one will be able to snatch us out of his hand. We live each day in the grip of God's grace, and nothing can take that away.

None of this can be accomplished by our own thoughts, efforts or actions, as the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on him. Our status before God never depends on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, on our knowledge level, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (John 10:28).

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that frees us from burdens, rather than oppresses us with rules. It does not say, "Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep." The voice of the Good Shepherd says, "I love you. I gave my life, died and rose from the grave for you - to claim you as my own. You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand." Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in

this 10th chapter of John: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance in years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is not a life that promises to be free of all suffering, sickness and struggle. It is life that is abundant in the love and forgiveness of God made known in Jesus Christ; a love which then overflows to others as we share our God given gifts with others like Tabitha did, along with the love and grace of God (John 13:34-35). The abundant life that the Good Shepherd gives is eternal life because its source is in God who is eternal (17:3), and in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life (11:25-26). The abundant life with the Good Shepherd brings us back from the death of our sin, into a new and resurrected life. The cross and empty tomb have changed the story’s end forever, as we have been transformed as God’s children, to become living witnesses to God’s grace, love and eternal life.

Amidst all the other voices we hear each day, which evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice of new life and promise – a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God’s own. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Set free from captivity to sin and death, we pray to the God of resurrection for the church, people in need, and all of creation. Gentle Shepherd, enable your church to respond to the voice of Jesus. Give us unfailing trust, unafraid to join in Jesus’ work of renewing all things. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Feed your people at the table of creation. Prepare a safe place for those whose environments are dangerous or unhealthy, especially those making difficult journeys. Prosper your creation for the sake of every living thing. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Warm the hearts of all who celebrate and all who mourn on Mother's Day. Accompany those yearning to be mothers. Help us to heal from broken family relationships and open us to receive your nurturing love from all who serve mothering roles in our lives. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Seek out those who weep while they await healing or consolation. Set people in their path who can provide the care they need, and wipe away every tear from their eyes. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Inspire the words of prophets and saints who employ innovative imagery to stretch our understanding. Send Christ to instruct us with motherly care. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Enfold us in the great multitude of saints from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. Wash us in your saving grace every day, guiding us to your waters of life.
God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In your mercy, O God, respond to these prayers, and renew us by your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Savior. **Amen.**