



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 4 (C)

#### Bestowing Life

[RCL] Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

*Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.*

Psalm 23 — and the idea of the Good Shepherd — saturate Western society. Not that that's a bad thing! "My Shepherd Will Supply My Need," "The King of Love My Shepherd Is," "Shepherd of Souls, Refresh and Bless," "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us," and the *Vicar of Dibley* theme song are just some examples of how we know this psalm. People who aren't religious choose it for their own funerals or for those of loved ones.

Those funeral liturgies are baptismal liturgies. When you pay attention to the words of the burial rite itself, Psalm 23 fits perfectly. It's not just a service to bring us closure — though a final ending helps our souls. The burial rite, the conclusion of the baptismal rite at the end of the life of the baptized, proclaims what this whole season of Easter tells us: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life. This is the core message of Christianity, and we hear it four different ways in our passages today.

In the text from Acts, we have fulfillment of Jesus' promises that his disciples will be able to do all that he has done and more. Tabitha dies in Joppa, and word is sent to get help for her. After she's been washed, she's set aside. The disciples aren't too far away, so two men go to Peter and ask for his help. He comes quickly, prays, and orders Tabitha to get up. The week before Passion Sunday we heard Jesus command Lazarus to come out of his tomb. This is the same miracle being worked, and being worked not only by Jesus. Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs — and upper rooms — bestowing life.

Psalm 23 ties nicely to the gospel this week, though not as well as the other two lectionary years. In the other two lectionary years, we hear much more about Jesus saying that he is the Good Shepherd. The psalmist praises God our shepherd who provides for us and keeps us from wanting: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

The followers of Jesus in Joppa walked through the valley of the shadow of death as Tabitha's illness brought her to death. Rather than being fearful, they knew of Jesus' defeat of death and rising from the grave. Their faith in his resurrection comforts them as they send word for the apostles. After she's brought back to life, surely Tabitha's cup runs over as God's goodness and mercy continue to follow her the rest of her life — again!

The psalmist praises God our shepherd, and then Jesus says — in passing, this year — that he is a shepherd to sheep to whom he will give eternal life. He talks about his sheep as knowing his voice, like a child learns how their parents knock on doors or how their gaits through the hallway sound. The passage from John today is after the passage we hear the other two years about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. When Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd, he's been performing miracles and asking his detractors, "Could anyone but the one sent by God do these miracles?"

When Jesus said that he was the Good Shepherd who would willingly lay down his life for the sheep, those against him said that he sounded like someone with a demon. Now they're asking him to speak plainly about whether he's the Messiah, whether he's God's chosen one who will set them free. He reminds them that he's done that and they weren't ready to hear it. The Good News that Jesus brings — as he changes what it means to be Messiah — isn't of military revolution against Rome, but of overcoming the powers of evil and death themselves. Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

When looking at this gospel passage today, it's important to remember that God's covenants with the Hebrew people are eternal. As John is writing, there is great conflict between the Jewish people who followed Jesus and those who didn't. Jesus' followers' lives have already started to be impacted by their public professions of faith, and John is mad about it. When we hear Jesus say, "You do not belong to my sheep," he's not rejecting them or replacing them; his other followers are also Jewish at this point!

The church has used passages like today's to do great harm to our Jewish siblings. It's important to name that history and be mindful of how we read these texts so that we don't let our hearts wander to even latent, quiet, polite antisemitism. What Jesus talks about much more in this passage is not those who *aren't* in his flock — but those who *are*. The focus of this passage is on those who are following Jesus, how he will give them eternal life, and how no one will be able to snatch those who follow him from his hand. Luke illustrates that reality in Acts when he tells us about Tabitha being resurrected, too.

The final way we hear from Scripture about Jesus being raised from the dead is in this beautiful passage from Revelation. We Episcopalians can get nervous about Revelation, especially if we lived through *Left Behind* mania — whether we were buying the books or watching other people do it. To be skittish about it, though, is to lose a part of our history that speaks to God's love for creation and humanity. This book was written to Christians just starting to face persecution, and was meant to encourage them to keep their faith in Jesus and his resurrection.

This passage is a break from John's prophecies about God's judgment on those who persecute Christians. John doesn't ever talk about Christians' martyrdoms directly. During this interlude, those who have come out of the great ordeal — those who have faced persecution and death — are gathered around the throne of God, singing to Jesus.

Listen to how John's heavenly guide describes them: "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." The Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we hear the Good News of God's salvation — redemption for the whole world, restoration to the fullness of health — with the image of a simple shepherd. We may be incredulous at Peter's raising Tabitha, but God who made the rules can suspend them as part of saving us! We don't see miracles like that around us very often, but that doesn't mean miracles aren't happening if we have eyes to see them.

As we go from this place in these uncertain and unprecedented times, the message of today's passage is to not give up, to keep the faith, and to have hope. As people who have been baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection, we keep the hope we have because Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

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