

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

We are in the fourth week of Easter. This season of celebrating Jesus' resurrection is already half over. It seems appropriate then that we turn a corner in our readings today: From the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus (First to Mary, then to the male disciples and Thomas, then to Peter over breakfast) we now turn to a different sort of encounter with Jesus.

Today is a special Sunday in Easter's "week of Sundays." It's called Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we look at Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Every year, we read a part of John 10 on this Sunday because in it Jesus describes himself as shepherd.

Why a shepherd? Sheep-herding was a much more pedestrian part of life in Jesus' day. Though shepherds were not highly regarded, shepherding was probably familiar to most people - Jesus' message would have been more widely accessible than it is today. But this image of Jesus as a shepherd is a powerful one still, for it has endured. It comes to us today through ancient tradition. Archeologists have found that the image of Jesus with a lamb over his shoulders (Jesus as shepherd) was among the first images that identified the emerging movement (the growing community of "The Way") that would become Christianity. In fact, it actually preceded the image of the cross by centuries.

And so it is, in the wake of the cross this Easter season, that we take this Sunday to visit this image and reflect on what about it spoke so clearly to our "*ancestors in the faith*" about who Jesus was. And perhaps too, look at what such an image of Jesus might have for us today.

Before going there, let's get into our passage here in John.

These folks asking for Jesus to tell them plainly I think are naming something basic to being human - our need for clarity. When things are unclear, anxiety is never far behind, right? And these days, un-clarity is everywhere, isn't it? We don't know what Covid will do next. We certainly didn't expect Russia to invade Ukraine - what might be next that we're not expecting? And all the unexpected things that can happen in our daily lives in terms of diagnoses, our bodies failing, even death - there's a lot that we just don't know. Dwelling in that "suspense" makes it hard to keep from living in fear. These people engaging Jesus in our story are after fighting that fear, seeking a sense of security, seeking clarity. Who can blame them?

John adds the smallest detail - that for them, "it was winter." A lean time, an unsure time when food might have been growing more scarce. For these people under occupation, uncertainty and fear were certainly not unusual. Having heard rumblings about this Jesus (rumblings of hope), maybe even having experienced his teaching, could they dare to think of him as the Messiah they were waiting for? "How long will you keep us in suspense?" But in asking him to "tell us plainly," they are asking him for certainty.

We long for that certainty at times too, don't we? We don't want to be duped, after all. We want all the information in bullet points before we commit. Jesus doesn't give us bullet points though, especially in John. Some of the circular language in other parts of John can even frustrate our faith if we go in looking for certainty. Thank goodness then that faith is not about certainty. Think about Thomas a few weeks ago - "Have you believed because you have seen me?" Jesus asks him. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

These folks asking Jesus for clarity and certainty, have seen but have not believed. Jesus tells them, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me.” Jesus has not been telling them in words **who he is** but in his actions. To these folks though, it hasn’t been enough to make them certain. Jesus tells them, “you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep.”

With these words, Jesus speaks here all the way into the 21st century - he’s saying **belonging is key to believing**. In the face of the anxiety produced by 50-years of dwindling church attendance numbers across the US and the christian west generally, Jesus is saying “Believing isn’t your problem - belonging is.”

For me, belonging came first. Seminary opened up the question about what my relationship to the Lutheran faith, the faith I was raised in, truly was. After a number of years of pushing it away, I put my toes back in the water (by coming back to church) and I recognized it. But more than that, I felt recognized by it. This faith and its ways of worship were part of who I was. I belonged to it, but I sure didn’t yet understand it, let alone believe it. That sense of belonging though prompted me to get to work exploring it. But in this way I am the exception to the rule.

More often, that rejection of the church sticks. There are lots of reasons for this. The most prominent for me was the way the loudest Christians shaped the popular understanding of “christian” as someone concerned most with who “truly belongs.” To me there were more and better things to be concerned about. But it’s not only the loudest voices with the highest boundaries segregating Sunday mornings in America: Look around the room - do you see anyone you don’t recognize? Maybe one or two. Ask yourself, “what conditions have we placed on ‘belonging’ in this church? Do we have a ‘believing’ requirement in place that keeps people out?” That’s worth a think.

Katrin Chandler, the newest member of Messiah who we'll be formally welcoming in a few minutes, is coming to us from a Lutheran faith community in Absarokee where she knew her "belonging" for a long time, and where she practiced her "believing" in community. When that "belonging" began to feel strained and diminished, I bet believing got a little tougher at times. But thank God she found her belonging again (full and clear) when she visited Messiah. We are thrilled Katrin, that you found your "belonging" here among us, and that you are here to help us practice and enrich our believing.

What then is it that we practice believing together on Sunday mornings?

We practice believing that God shows up in worship, through Jesus | made flesh in the hands and faces of our neighbors, and in the meal of his body and blood that we share. We practice believing that the Spirit shows up too, stirring, supporting and renewing us, and making us one. We practice believing that we belong to Christ, who seeks us out - lost as we are at times; and that he does this to know us, to heal and free us, and to send us in love to each other and to our neighbors. We practice believing that belonging in God knows no bounds. We practice believing that in the face of death, Jesus' relationship with us holds, refusing death the last word.

Are we certain that any of this is true? Are we, like these folks asking Jesus to cut the suspense and tell us plainly, dying for a clear word that we can depend upon through all our anxieties? I don't think we are, because what we're after with Jesus isn't proof. What Jesus is after with us is not belief as we might define it. **What Jesus wants with us and what we need from Jesus is relationship.** It's in that relationship that belonging is ultimately found. It's in that relationship that belief can start growing like spring flowers. It's in that relationship that we are gathered, in which we can practice our believing together without fear of the anxieties that plague us. And it's in that relationship that we are led.

What Jesus in the end is clear about is what exactly the leading he does with those with whom he's in relationship looks like. He brings us to green pastures, yes. He leads us to still waters, restoring our souls, yes. He leads us in right paths. But these paths are not always green or comfortable. Often in fact, these paths take us through dark valleys, even and especially the valley of death.

I went to visit Herb and Myrna Hunt this last Wednesday up in Billings. For those who might not know, Myrna is in late stage decline with Alzheimers. When I walked in the door, Allen Hansen and Andrea were sitting and visiting with them. I went over and sat with Myrna and put her hand in mine. She wasn't able to say very much but I spoke to her a little about how glad I was to see her and how much we miss them. I told her some of the texts we would be reading this Sunday and I recited the 23rd psalm to her. "What a good psalm this is for what you're going through right now: The Lord is your shepherd Myrna."

I don't know if Peter could have recited this psalm. But Peter knew what it said - he knew the truth of it. Two men came to him with news of the death of Tabitha, a devoted and beloved disciple. When they asked Peter, "Please come to us without delay," Peter went. Called to the bedside of this beloved woman in the clutches of death, Peter knelt and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." She sat up, he gave her his hand and helped her get up.

That can be a hard call to answer, the call to the bedside of the dying or the dead. But Peter answered it, without even pausing, without delay. Led to answer it, he went to what remained of Tabitha and then he knelt and leaned into his belonging - he prayed. He leaned into the relationship he knew he had with God through Jesus, and God did something amazing. What did Peter know that we don't? He probably didn't know the 23rd Psalm word for word. He certainly knew that life's anxieties swirl in the face of death, and that the path Jesus leads us down can take us to truly uncertain, deathly places. But he knew too | to fear no evil, "for you are with me." He knew his full belonging as beloved in God, and he believed it.

When I call Katrin forward, I'll say some words and ask some questions, all of which have to do with our belonging. This will be practice remembering the kind of belonging we have in God - the kind of belonging we have through baptism. Katrin, I want you to believe your belonging. Messiah, I want you to remember your belonging, for today we promise to help Katrin remember her belonging. God has called each of us to this "place of belonging" through baptism. With you Katrin we affirm your belonging as we remember our own. With you we believe your belonging, and we'll practice that believing together.

We heard about this very belonging in our reading from the book of Revelation. The great multitude “that no one could count,” were from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages of the earth, and they stand all before the throne and before the lamb.

When asked who this multitude is, John does not know. The elder who asked him tells him - “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.” We all have some sense of the ordeal he’s referring to. **For we stand among this multitude as well.** We know our private ordeals, and we all have a sense of the trials that spur our anxieties, uncertainty and fear. But we are told that the one seated on the throne will shelter us. That hunger and thirst will be no more, that the sun will not strike nor any heat scorch. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be our shepherd and every tear will be wiped from every eye.

In the midst of our ordeals, we lean on the practice we do here - the believing we practice. For nothing tests our ‘believing’ like the trials we face day to day, or the ordeal at the end of life. But today that practice holds us firmly, just as Jesus does, reminding us that the one seated on the throne will lead us like a shepherd.

AMEN