

## Easter 4A 2020 Sermon

Acts 2:42-47

Psalms 23

### John 10:1-10

Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The Pew Research Center issued a report this past Thursday titled, “Few Americans say their house of worship is open, but a quarter say their faith has grown amid pandemic.” The Pew survey showed that 24% of adults in the United States say their faith has become *stronger* because of the coronavirus pandemic, while just 2% say their faith has become weaker.<sup>1</sup>

The research did not indicate WHY a quarter of American adults said their faith has grown amid this pandemic. But let me suggest some possibilities.

First, people’s lives have become less busy and distracted, giving us more time to go inside ourselves and listen to that “still, small voice,” that voice of God, which speaks in each of our hearts. I mentioned this in my sermon last week, which was about the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who didn’t recognize Jesus walking alongside them. I said that our lives are so filled with distractions that we can’t see Jesus, who is **always** with us.

So, I think *one* reason that a quarter of Americans say their faith has been strengthened during this time of pandemic is that our busy-ness and distractions have decreased, and we have been able, as God says through the psalmist, to “be still and know that I am God.”

*Another* reason, I believe, that a quarter of Americans say their faith has been strengthened during this time of pandemic is that this virus is a real threat to our lives the lives of our loved ones, and the life of every human being on the face of this planet. This has caused us to *appreciate* God’s gift of **Life** so much more; appreciate how *fragile* and *precious* life truly is. This impossibly small, *invisible*

virus has already, in a few short months, killed more Americans than the years-long Vietnam War.

A corollary to this greater appreciation of the fragility and preciousness of life is that we have become more grateful. We have become more grateful for all of the first-responders, health care workers, and those in other necessary vocations, including grocery store workers, farm workers, workers in Amazon warehouses and in meat-packing plants and other lower wage workers who risk their lives daily *for us* – for you and for me. At this time when we have been unable to physically go to our church building to worship, we have become more grateful for our fellow church members, and for the technologies that allow us to maintain worship and connection and fellowship while being physically distant from one another. As we have had more time to spend outdoors in our yards or going on walks, we have become more grateful for – and *aware* of – the countless ways God comes to us through God’s wondrous Creation: through trees, green grass, sprouting seeds, and fragrant flowers (like the lilacs just beginning to bloom in my yard!).

Today, that Sunday of the church year which we call “Good Shepherd Sunday,” we read, in our Scripture lessons, of gratitude and abundance. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read about the New Testament church: “All who believed... had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, ...they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts...” Today, we hear similar stories of gratitude and generosity: people making masks for those who have none, people sharing food and supplies, people offering to run errands for those at risk, publishers and producers offering free books and movies and videos to download from the internet, and on and on.

In our Psalm today, the Psalmist is **filled** with gratitude and faith in God’s goodness. He writes:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake. 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. You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

What a comfort and encouragement these words are at this time when the whole of humanity is walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Yes, the Lord is *still* our Shepherd, who spreads a table before us in the presence of this virus, who still fills our cups to overflowing, whose goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives – as long, or as short, as those lives might be. It would be a

wonderful spiritual practice to read the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm each day in this season of pandemic.

In our **Gospel** reading today, Jesus says that he calls his own sheep – you and I! – by name, and leads us out, going ahead of us. He says, “I came that they [meaning you and I!] may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Jesus came that we might have life in all its **abundance!** The Greek word which Jesus uses here is actually more accurately translated *super-abundance!* The very reason for Jesus coming to live among us was that we might have this quality of life which he describes as *super-abundant* life! Another way the New Testament describes this quality of life is “resurrected life.” In the very *next* chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “You don’t have to wait for the End. I **am**, *right now*, Resurrection and Life.” (John 11:25, MSG) And again, in John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I make my home in you.” (John 15:4, MSG) Christ’s resurrected life, super-abundant Life, living in you and me! St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is **in** you...” (Col. 1:27, MSG)

My friends, those early Christians that we read about in the New Testament **knew** this *super-abundant* life! They not only **saw** Jesus risen from the dead, they *experienced* his resurrected Life within their very beings, and it was so wonderful, so miraculous, that it turned their lives totally upside down. St. Paul had been a self-righteous, legalistic Pharisee determined to wipe out the sect of Jesus-followers. But then he experienced something which put to death his **old** way of life and gave him a kind of *super-abundant* life that transformed him into the most **ardent** *follower* of Jesus, causing him to write, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives *in* me...” (Galatians 2:19-20, NRSV) When Christ lives *in* us, we experience super-abundant life!

I said that one reason that a quarter of Americans have found that their faith has grown during this pandemic is that it has made us more aware of the preciousness of life, and has caused us to become more grateful. Another corollary to this increased awareness of the preciousness of life is that it has put into perspective the *trivialities* that so often **consumed** us pre-coronavirus, during that time we now look back on and call “normality.” In the face of health care workers risking their lives daily to save the lives of those ravaged by this virus, so much else becomes inconsequential in comparison. Our partisan political bickering, which has even *endangered* lives in some instances; our determination to prove ourselves “right” and the other person or party or nation “wrong.” It’s all exposed as so *trifling* and petty in the face of the mortal risks and sacrifices being made on our behalf, day in and day out.

My friends, may we NOT go back to “normality” if it means returning to the partisan bickering, self-righteousness, and pettiness which this time of pandemic

has unmasked as being so trifling, so wrong. May we instead, together with persons of all faiths, ethnicities, nationalities, and socio-economic classes forge a **new** normal characterized by **super-abundant life** – life lived in Christ and in Christ’s self-sacrificial love, which is being modeled for us by so many health care workers and others on the “frontlines” every single day. The Second Century bishop St. Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” If we can put aside trivialities, let go of our ego selves, go inward, live from that place in our hearts where Christ lives, realize the preciousness of life in all its vulnerable fragility, and become ever more grateful, we can forge a **new** normality out of the death, isolation, and financial devastation of this pandemic. Our faith can indeed grow, and we can bring to fulfillment the very reason that Christ came to earth: that we might have Life, and have it super-abundantly.

Do we long to return to “normal?” Or do we long to be *fully alive*?

AMEN

1 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their-house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/>