

April 21, 2024
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Ezekiel 34:1-24
John 10:11-18
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

In Retrospect

Today, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we take a major step backwards. The past three weeks, since Easter Sunday, our gospel readings have all been from the time period right around Easter Sunday, the morning or evening of Easter Day or a week later, telling us stories about Jesus, after his resurrection, coming to his disciples, doing various things to persuade them of the reality of his resurrection; sending angels to them, appearing to them in locked rooms, giving them his peace, breathing on them, giving them the Holy Spirit, showing them his hands and his side, the wounds of crucifixion, eating in their presence, embracing the believers and the unbelievers alike.

But today, in our gospel reading, we move back in time, and find Jesus, long before his crucifixion and his resurrection, in the streets of Jerusalem, in the middle of a conflict with the religious leaders of his day, the Pharisees, who, just before this, had thrown a man out of the synagogue for being healed by Jesus and for refusing to say that Jesus, the man who had healed him was a sinner.

Every year, our gospel reading on the Fourth Sunday of Easter is from chapter 10 of John's gospel. This Sunday is nicknamed in the church, "Good Shepherd Sunday" because the gospel reading is always from John 10, when Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep.

Back in February of 2011, Britton turned 40 and I was planning a surprise party for him.

We were also planning Cyrus's baptism at the end of February. My timing for everything was strategic. We had planned Cyrus's baptism for the end of

February because it gave us Britton's February break to get ready for the baptism and for the party afterwards.

I planned Britton's birthday surprise party for the Friday before the baptism, so that I would have his help getting everything ready. The week before he would be helping me get ready for his own surprise party and he wouldn't even know it. It was especially perfect because Britton's parents were coming for the baptism, that, of course, Britton knew about, and the surprise party that they knew about, but that he didn't. His birthday is at the beginning of February, but the party was going to be at the end of February, so he didn't even suspect anything about what was going on.

I'm sure that we did something for his birthday on his birthday, but I don't remember what. Keep in mind that at that time, Abigail was 7, Julia was 5, John had just turned two, and Cyrus was three months. I'm sure that it never crossed Britton's mind that I would try to pull off a surprise birthday party for him.

It was all working out perfectly, when, on the Wednesday before the party and the baptism, I slipped on a puzzle piece, one of those puzzles with the big handles, for toddlers, went flying across our living room, while holding Cyrus, and fell, protecting him and breaking my ankle. Needless to say, I kind of freaked out. I had four little kids, a full-time job, two parties coming up in the next four days, and was on crutches, non-weight bearing for at least four weeks, maybe more. Also, as this was my first broken bone, I discovered how much a broken bone hurt and for how long. I was in considerable pain and feeling very fragile.

Of course, Britton thought he understood why I was so upset, but he didn't know the whole story. It wasn't until, after his mom and I had sent him and his dad out to run errands for the baptism party on Friday evening and he walked back into the house to find it filled with people shouting "Surprise," that he fully understood everything that had been going on in the days before. The phone calls, the whispers,

as I tried to get his parents, and my parents, and our friends, to do what I could no longer do to get ready for this party.

It was a great surprise and one of the most fun celebrations we've ever had, made, perhaps, even sweeter by the fact that it came in the middle of what turned out to be a time of crisis for us.

[Jesus said:] ¹¹“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Back when Jesus first said those words, his disciples, who heard them, along with the pharisees, and the crowds, who gathered to hear what the Pharisees, and the man, the stranger, the healer of the blind man, the one some called rabbi, some called prophet, some called madman, some called sinner, the one, about whom some even whispered, “Could he be the messiah?”, were debating about, probably had no idea what he was talking about.

What did it mean for this man to say, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep?” (John 10:11) What was all this talk about hired hands who do not own the sheep, who do not care for the sheep, who abandon the sheep, when the wolf comes? Sometimes you really don't understand what's going on, except in retrospect.

The most astute among them, the ones who really paid attention when they went to synagogue, the ones who had studied the scriptures, might have heard in Jesus' words, an echo of the words of the prophet Ezekiel, who, in chapter 34 of his book, talks, not about hired hands, but about the bad shepherds, who fed themselves and not the sheep, who allowed the flock to be scattered, who did not seek the lost or bind up the injured or heal the sick.

The false shepherds were a metaphor for the failures of the kings and religious leaders of Israel, who had abused their positions, who had failed to lead with integrity, who had failed to care for the people who had been entrusted to them,

who had exploited and abandoned their people, and who looked out only for themselves. Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord had spoken, saying,

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

Later the Lord had said, through the same prophet, also in chapter 34:

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken. (Ezekiel 34:23-24)

And here was Jesus, speaking to the religious leaders, in conflict with the religious leaders, telling them that he is the good shepherd. Bold words for someone to use, given the background, of the words of the prophet. In his words, about

being a good shepherd, for any who were paying close attention, Jesus could be understood as claiming the title of messiah for himself.

But what was all of that about laying down his life for the sheep, and gathering those who did not belong to the fold? There was nothing about that in Ezekiel. In the time that Jesus spoke these words in the presence of his friends, to his opponents, and in the presence of the curious crowds, those words must not have made much sense to anyone who heard them.

But, imagine the disciples, in the days after Jesus' crucifixion, in the moments between Jesus' resurrection appearances, sitting together and talking, talking, talking about all the things that they had heard and seen. Remembering the things that Jesus had said, as they started to realize what he had meant, what he had been talking about. Imagine them remembering Jesus' words about laying down his life for his sheep in the light of his death and then his resurrection.

Imagine them thinking about what it might mean for Jesus to gather those not of his fold into his flock.

Imagine how Jesus' mysterious words, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." (John 10:18) must have rung in their ears, after they had seen the empty tomb, felt Jesus resurrected breath on their faces, seen him eat with them, heard him talk with him, seen his living body, his life taken up again.

Imagine how it must have made them feel, as the life that they had lived with Jesus, the words Jesus had said to them and in their presence, and the life that Jesus was offering them, post-resurrection, began to make sense to them, came into focus, something that they could only understand in retrospect, in the light of resurrection.

And so, we hear these words, like Jesus' disciples, remembering what he had said to them when he was with them, as their rabbi and their friend, after Easter Day, but during the season of Easter, the season of resurrection.

There will not be many more stories about the resurrected Jesus with his disciples during this Easter season. Instead, we will hear Jesus' promises made and fulfilled in his death and resurrection. And we, like those long-ago disciples, can hear and know that we have been gathered into the fold and flock of the good shepherd, who has laid down his life for us, and who has taken it up again, so that we too can have life and have it abundantly.

And so, we say, as comprehension dawns, and understanding grows, "Surprise!" No, really, we say, "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" "Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!"