

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, 2014
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Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, and we always take a break at this time from the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to read one of the several passages from the Gospels where Jesus uses the metaphor of shepherd and sheep to talk about our relationship with Jesus, with, God, and with the reign of God to which we are called.

Lots of my clergy friends have been wringing their hands this week and chatting on Facebook and exchanging e-mails to see if any of us has any new angle on Jesus the Good shepherd that might speak to their congregations in a fresh way.

And the reason we all do this, I suspect, is that we don't really have any old angles to approach the shepherd metaphor. Shepherds have been absent from the developed world for a long time. Even in the rich farmland around Mt. Airy, while there may well be plenty of sheep farmers, I don't think there is anyone that Jesus would recognize as a shepherd – someone who lives with the sheep basically full time, camps out with them as they move from one

pasture to another, and brings them back to the family farmhouse only for shearing, slaughtering, and wintering.

Because this way of life is alien to us, we don't really understand the role of shepherd or of sheep, and the metaphor is opaque to us, as apparently it was to the disciples themselves at first.

Fortunately for us, though, the reading from the Acts of the Apostles offers us something more concrete – a description of what the first followers of Jesus thought living as the flock of the Good Shepherd should be:

“All who believed were together and 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, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

So Jesus lived among them and taught them and loved them and died for them, and rose again, and taught some more, and ascends to the heavens, and pretty soon the Disciples are all Communists, holding all their property in common.

How did they get from point A to what I guess we should call point C?

First off, to understand what happened, we, like Jesus' first followers, have to make some sense out of this whole resurrection business. Why should resurrection matter? Jesus' message hadn't changed. The followers of Jesus had heard his teaching before he died. The Disciples, we're told, had been running around the countryside healing people and casting out demons in Jesus name before that fateful trip into Jerusalem. Surely if Jesus had not returned they would have worked their way through the grieving process and gotten back to work eventually.

But Jesus' resurrection did change things. In fact, it changed just about everything. The content of Jesus' teaching was the same, but the context was now completely different.

Because, you see, when Jesus returned from the dead, it meant that the reign of God wasn't just very near, it was here. It meant that the forces of empire and death weren't merely destined to lose against love and life, they had lost. The whole order of the universe, in which the dead stayed dead and power was the property of the powerful, had broken apart and been made new. And yet, somehow, like the bread and the wine on the altar that are the body and blood of Christ, everything still looked the same.

And the rest of scripture – the Acts of the Apostles and all of those letters to the struggling communities of Corinth and Thessaloniki and Ephesus and Rome, not to mention the book of Revelation, and even the rejected books like the Gospel of Thomas and the other so-called Gnostic Gospels – all of that is the record of Jesus’ first followers trying to make sense of what had happened; trying to work out how to live in a changed world – how to be true not just to Jesus’ teachings but to his resurrection.

And they tried all kinds of things. Communal living was one way they tried, the main point being in that verse we heard that says “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” That is the fruit of living out the life of the flock of the Good Shepherd – as the psalm puts it: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.” Or in my own translation of the Twenty-third Psalm from my Children’s Psalter: “With God for my shepherd I have everything I need.”

That no one should be in need was the goal, and communal living was the first Christians’ way of achieving it. At times, scripture tells us, that goal was hard to reach. Early Christians stole from the common purse, or held back a portion of what they had, with disastrous results. In Corinth, we learn from Paul, when the faithful gathered to try to live out Jesus’ mandate to

break bread in his name, some members of the community refused to share the food they brought with others. So Paul instructs them that if they aren't going to share, they should eat their private food in private, before they come, and not make the Lord's Supper look like the pre-resurrection world order.

Again and again, we read of the followers of Jesus trying to work out how to live our resurrected lives in a world that doesn't seem to know it has been transformed.

Weighty questions get debated. Do you have to become Jewish to be a follower of Jesus? Just who is Jesus? Is he God, as Thomas so fervently declared? Or is he human? Or something else entirely? What should be the place of women in the new community? How engaged should one be with the world while waiting for it to end? What about slavery? Should the news about Jesus be kept secret, or publicly proclaimed? Is Saturday or Sunday the proper day for worship?

Many, many questions. And the record that has come down to us shows many, many answers – many attempts to figure out how to live as resurrected people. Some of those answers get tried and rejected right away.

Some work well while the community is small, but fail as it grows. Some agreements take years, or even centuries of argument to reach.

And after all of that, the main question still remains for us: How do we live as resurrected people in a world that doesn't know it has been transformed?

And there is no permanent, universal answer to this question. The life and witness to the resurrection that makes sense in Mt. Airy today makes no sense in a village in Syria, or in a suburb of Tokyo, or even nearby in the impoverished parts of Baltimore and Washington. We, like our ancestors, must keep experimenting, keep adapting.

And keep learning. Just as our ancestors finally figured out that, although certain passages of scripture – certain attempts to figure out how to live as followers of the resurrected Jesus – supported slavery, it was nonetheless impossible, in the end, to live a life of resurrection without condemning and abolishing slavery, we are discovering that, scripture notwithstanding, the resurrected life requires us to change our attitudes and practices with respect to women and sexual minorities.

But if all our answers, all our solutions are provisional, how can we know what to do? How can we tell if we have the answer for right now?

That's actually an easy question to answer. It's right there in today's lesson from the Acts of the Apostles: "they would...distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Jesus told us what the signs of the reign of God are: All are welcomed. All are fed. All are sheltered. All are healed. All are free. Those are the goals that must guide our choices – in the organizing of a community, in the choosing of a new rector, in the worship of our God.

And when we see the signs of the reign of God erupting in our community – when there is not a needy person among us, when the welcome of our house approaches the welcome of God's household – then it becomes perfectly obvious why we speak of Jesus' resurrection in the present tense: not "Christ was risen," or "Christ will be risen," but

Alleluia! Christ IS risen!

Amen.