

Sermon, 29 April 2007—Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd)
Acts 13:15-6, 26-33; Psalm 100; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Every year, on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, we hear portions of the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to John, in which Jesus presents himself as the one who cares for the sheep: he is the gate, by which they enter safely into the sheepfold, and he is the Good Shepherd, who calls them and leads them and secures them. This image is inextricably intertwined with Easter.

It is, of all the images of Christ, the one most deeply rooted in Hebrew history. They were the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, nomads who tended their flocks as they searched for pasture and streams of water across the Promised Land. They were the subjects of David, who had been anointed king while still a shepherd boy—and David himself had sung, “the LORD is my shepherd.” To claim God as shepherd was a seamless self-reflection: just as they cared for their own sheep, so they were the sheep of a greater shepherd, who led the people of Israel like a flock out of Egypt through the wilderness. So Jesus, in making God’s presence known, must be recognized as the shepherd who provides for and protects those that follow him. That depiction of God, with all its tribal nostalgia, had to become attributed to him.

However, as you know, the Church is not simply one of the evolutions of Judaism, but, as Paul says, also a grafting of the wild olive branch of Gentile pagan antiquity, with all its concepts and habits, onto the ancient trunk of Jewish thought and practice. That is true also of this image of a shepherd whose care of sheep is symbolic of the tending of humanity. Hellenistic and Roman tombstones often depicted a young man, clean shaven, in a short tunic, carrying a lamb across his shoulders. This was Hermes, messenger of the gods,

who also cared for human beings as our soul's escort, the divinity who assured safe passage through death, our spiritual guide to the next world. Christians quickly appropriated this image as a venerable one, rooted in Scripture, but safe to depict on their own tombs. In the catacombs, those mazelike subterranean burial grounds off the Appian Way, the ancient highway that leads into Rome, the predominant image is of this young man, carrying a lamb on his shoulders.

The association of the shepherd with death is not simply the pagan contribution. The Psalm I've already mentioned is the Psalm most often used at funerals. This shepherd, who makes us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters, is with us, David says, when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The Jews would have recognized Hermes, carrying the lamb through death, though they had no sense of the lush Elysian Fields of eternity sung by the pagan poets. In fact, the shepherd depicted in Psalm 49 is death: "like a flock of sheep," the Psalmists sings, "they are destined to die; death is their shepherd, and they go down straightway to the grave."

Here we begin to touch on the courage and realism of the image of the shepherd. Sheep were not raised as pets, after all. They were not the hobby of the idle rich. They were wealth because they were food. They were protected in order to be slaughtered. In coming to recognize themselves as God's flock, the people of Israel were admitting that our journey together has only one destination for all of us, and that God somehow, mysteriously, omnipresently, presides over our doom, which only He comprehends, which we do not escape.

Christians added that the Shepherd was himself a slaughtered Lamb. This they found had already spoken by the prophet Isaiah, who described God's servant as a lamb led to slaughter, recalling both Temple offerings and Passover sacrifice, whose blood protected the homes of the Jewish slaves in Egypt from the death of their firstborn in the final plague. Dipped in that Lamb's blood, on

the other side of death, our stained garments become as white as the dazzling robes of the angelic messengers who announced Christ's Resurrection.

Only if we receive and consent to this fearlessness with which Scripture looks at the fragility and suffering of human existence can we begin to endure the battering of horror in the news, whether a day at Virginia Tech, or years in Iraq, or decade after decade in Africa. I am not talking of resurrection yet. I am saying that the faith we profess is of a God that did not exempt himself from death. Think of that. In God becoming human, the only level ground on which all of us could meet Him as one of us is death—not because death is supreme, but because death is the one thing we both share and cannot hand off to anyone else. My death is the one thing that is entirely mine, which no one can do for me; and your death is the one thing that is entirely yours, which you will do on your own as well. This is the one thing we know with certainty about each other. And, in order to be with us, God did not exempt from himself this one common characteristic of all creatures. So first of all, we are able, by this fearless acknowledgement in Scripture, to say in the presence of these corpses, “you are what I will be; you are what my Lord already has been.”

I cannot help you with the mystery of iniquity. I do not know why some respond to our fundamental vulnerability with destruction, not pity. The shepherd carrying the lamb through death reminds us that God is the one to lift the soul through the dark. No creature can carry that burden. No one has a right to violate life, to measure the days of a fellow human being. I can imagine that killing oneself and killing others—this assault on life itself—expresses a tangled rage against the Giver of Life, an ultimate “NO.” It offers itself as a powerful action because it is an irrevocable one: nothing on earth can reverse its course. Some must undergo it as a sinister seduction: killing must appear as the most powerful action possible, since it cannot be recalled. What a temptation

for someone who feels powerless: to hurl what is most precious and intimate beyond reach for ever! How lost in passion, to demand such a total sacrifice!

Only here do we begin to open up the meaning given to the crucifixion. The blasphemy of taking life and the sublimity of giving life begin to come into focus there. Jesus says in the Gospel of John that his life is not taken from him, but he lays it down; and he adds later that no one has greater love than to give one's life for one's friends. He gives the gift that can be neither retrieved nor returned. The Resurrection is glorious, not because divinity wakes up after a taking a nap. The glory of the Resurrection is God's firm "no more of this" to human violence and mortality. It is God's ultimate "NO" to our lust for self-destruction. It is not the denial of death, because God did not deny death even to himself in Christ, in order to meet us there. Instead it is the demonstration that God is greater than death and will not allow death to have the last word.

I said on Easter Day that we know these things, but hardly believe them, because we have not experienced them. We know when our intellect consents to certain propositions which we comprehend; but we believe when our heart assents to certain commitments which we trust. These words slip back and forth; they have shallow and deep meanings. To know shallowly is to have a text and facts memorized (no understanding is required); but to know deeply is to have all the foundations of our intellect in support of a concept, unshaken, reliable, constant. To believe shallowly is to imagine without investigation, to indulge wishful thinking (the gangrene of religion); but to believe deeply is to understand that material and quantitative proof is not available in what matters the most. To know is in some sense independent of us—it is the fact or the concept that is reliable, and that is the danger: we can become detached from what we know, as if it had nothing to do with us. To believe is in some sense totally dependent on us—we ourselves become reliable when we believe, and

that is the danger: we do not always inspect the foundation fully, as if what we were building could be anything at all, because it depends on us.

Only experience leads us from one to the other. To experience shallowly is to be passive, to let things happen to us; but to experience deeply is to reflect and incorporate an event we have undergone into a transformed worldview. To experience is in some sense the bridge between what is known and what is believed: our experience brings knowledge in the shallow sense home to belief in the deep sense—particularly in the realm of the spirit, where quantification is not possible. But the transformative breakthrough is not under our control, and cannot be under our control, because that would mean we could initiate it and manage it and settle it. God, not we, acts to transform us from cool knowers to warm believers. God raised Christ from the dead. God guides us through the shadows of death. Jesus is asked, in today's Gospel reading, "Are you the Messiah? If so, tell us plainly." But he can only respond, "I have told you, and you do not believe;" and he adds that this is because they are not the sheep given to him by his Father, because those sheep would recognize his voice. What wakes us up to the experience of new life is the voice of God. The mystery of salvation is no less deep than the mystery of iniquity: we do not determine on what day we hear that voice, though it calls everyone.

I will repeat myself. The day comes when God verifies the truths of Scripture in us, when the breath of God stirs them into life in us, when the finger of God wounds us and we feel then the bruise of the Spirit. We already know that God is love, that forgiveness is possible, that death is not the end, that the Spirit dwells in us, that we have nothing to fear, that new life is ours. The mystery is this: at the edge of death, where we feel most out of control, most helpless, most rendered into abjection, that is where some find the depths of God trustworthy and the path through the valley firm underfoot.

I cannot forget the Romanian professor at Virginia Tech, who blocked the doorway of his classroom and received the bullets so his students could escape through the windows. In an instant, it is finished. He himself became Hermes, the escort of souls, and the good shepherd, laying down his life for his sheep. He was a survivor of the Holocaust and already knew the mystery of iniquity. In him, that knowledge had become the mystery of salvation, because he did not fear death. I do not know the text of his convictions, but I do know that the result of the Resurrection in those who receive its power is the removal of the fear of death. The One who promised is faithful. God evacuates death.

The Resurrection is not a particular favor to Jesus; it is the empowerment of his followers. We can speak with courage, because the limits of death have been exposed. We are free to act with compassion and justice, because this one shepherd guides all of us as his sheep, which nothing can snatch out of his hand. God vindicates Jesus' ministry by raising him from the dead; God perpetuates Jesus' ministry by showing him raised to his followers. The Resurrection is not to rescue and reward Jesus and to reassure us, but to demonstrate that the power of God is for renewal and restoration and reconciliation. The fear of death is removed in us so that the creativity of God can continue in us. The love of the Creator for the creature is not given to us in order to be sealed up even with the costliest of spices in the most delectable crevasses of our spirituality. God's love of us is given to us to pass on. The tomb must be emptied to show that this love does not let death have the final word, but is itself eternal life. The shepherd who guides us leads us through what has no ultimate power over us, because he and our Father are one, and he will lose nothing of what his Father has given him, but guide us to the springs of the Water of Life. This one God, Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, we hope to know

in the power of his Resurrection, so that we might rejoice in that unending life and praise that eternal glory forever.