



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN!

Christ is Risen. . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Today is the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter and it is also known as the Good Shepherd Sunday. Our readings, our sermon hymn and our prayers are all centered on the idea that Jesus is the “Good Shepherd”, and we are the sheep of his flock.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I am not quite sure that I like the idea of being a sheep. Sheep as portrayed in Scripture, are quite dumb, defenseless, and cannot survive on their own. They need a shepherd. Although it seems to be a good metaphor for us to be the flock that follows Jesus, sometimes it does not sit right. And as a pastor, I am often referred to as the shepherd of the flock, flock meaning this congregation. Well, that too is hard to imagine. I am only human and somedays I feel like one of the sheep. And then there are days when I can sort of think of myself being head sheep, but way above my pay grade to assume the responsibility of being the “Good Shepherd”.

Well, Scripture tells us that Jesus is the “Good Shepherd.” And if you were here last week, you know that the Bible is the inspired word of God. It is how God speaks to us. And according to the Gospel of John that we have before us this morning, Jesus tells us himself that He is the “Good Shepherd”. Jesus will lay down his life for us, his sheep. We need to listen to his voice. And there is only one shepherd and only one flock. God, His Father sent Him to be the “Good Shepherd” and to give up his life for us. Jesus tells us all this in this short passage.

And Jesus is not a silent shepherd. He calls out to us. And He calls us by name. Folks, you all know that there is nothing sweeter than to hear your own name. That is unless it gets called first to give their speech in class or who will go in front of the firing squad first. This is a very personal call from Jesus. He doesn’t just say “Hey You over there is the fluffy white outfit.” Jesus actually knows who we are, not to mention what we need and the person we can become. Jesus wants us to be the

person we are made to be, the one that He redeemed with His blood. We are special. We are his flock.

With that being said, we do have a responsibility to our good shepherd. It is important that we listen. We have to make the decision to listen. Listening is an important skill that requires giving our full attention and lots of energy. It is not a passive act by any means.

Think with me a minute about the last time you listened to a friend that had a huge problem that they laid on you. They needed to talk, and you were designated as the listener. I am sure that it was draining to say the least. Letting go of your ideas how to fix their problem and not interrupting is difficult. And when the conversation is over, there is still stress that remains after listening to troubled people.

And if we flip this idea up-side down and remember the last time we were the one who was seeking someone to listen to our story. We need a friend just to listen to us. For me that experience can be quite rewarding to really be heard. Today in our society I think many have lost the ability to listen as well as experiencing the joy of being listened too.

I had a call this week from a dear friend who was facing a doctor's appointment. She was afraid to hear what the doctor had to say, afraid that there was nothing they could do to make her life easier or longer. She even began our conversation saying that she needed to talk out something and knew I would listen. And so, I did. It was about her need to make a life-or-death decision. After about 15 minutes she stopped and asked me what she should do. All I could say is that now it was her turn to be on the listening side. She should go to that appointment and listen to her options. And if she did not understand then ask the doctor to repeat. I suggested maybe even writing down some of what he said would be good.

A decade ago, I would not have been as good at listening as I am today. I have had a lot of practice, and yet still don't feel I am as good as I should be. But I have tried to be better at listening. I also, have found a friend that will listen to me when I need to be heard.

Being a disciple for Jesus has a cost for us, a cost of listening. When we hear the words of Jesus, if we really listen to them, it opens us up to being touched and changed. When we hear the truth of Scripture it challenges us. In fact, it can shake up our world as we know it. And no one likes their boat to be rocked.

Much of society is against our listening to Jesus, often times it is deliberate and sometimes not. When we follow the Lord, we can be criticized for doing so. And it is truly hard, hard not to let the distractions of the world get in the way. Seems like there is always some noise going on around us that is not productive, at least not what we need to hear to be a good disciple for Jesus.

One thing that I do know is that Jesus can speak loudly over the din of society. And He speaks often. He calls our name regularly. Do you ever hear the Good Shepherds voice during worship? Whether in the silence before we start worship, in the sermon, during Scripture reading, or in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Or maybe God calls you in the words or melody of a hymn we sing or in the familiar prayers spoken. I surely hope that is the case. Many of you have seen me in tears during a worship service. There are times when I hear God speak to me directly as I lead worship. It is an awesome experience that I hope you come to have as well.

Worshipping together is important both collectively and individually. Flock mentality is important as it is where we are trained to listen for God together in worship. We are here today to hear the Shepherd's voice. If we can hear his voice in worship, it will be much easier to continue to hear His call the other 6 days of the week. Remember, God is always with us. He is never absent from us; we just need to quiet our hearts and listen. One important thing to remember is that we need to discern who we should be listening to.

Each month I ask the confirmation students to take sermon notes about their experience in worship. Not just to ask about the message I gave, but who they sat next to, what song they liked the best, what was meaningful to them and who they might ask to come next Sunday to join them for worship. The last question on the form they use, is do they have any questions about anything. Not long ago one student asked if it was OK to listen to church service on-line instead of coming to join in worship here at Christ the Servant. Great question! What a loaded question. On the spot my easy answer was yes and no. Yes, because any time you can hear God's word it is good, but you have to be careful as to who you are listening to. There are many false preachers out there after your spirit and your money. And no because you miss the experience of gathering together to worship. We miss hearing the call to go out and share our faith and serve our neighbor.

Discipleship requires us not only to listen to the Good Shepherd but to follow where he leads us. We cannot sit still or just wander around aimlessly. If we are to be Jesus' disciples, we hear the call to follow him and we follow. Some of what we are asked to do might take us out of our comfort zone or our happy place. But the Holy Spirit will walk with us.

I do believe that the more we follow, the greater our trust grows and the greater our ability to hear the Good Shepherd. As the Rev. Hoffacker once said, "Discipleship helps to open our ears. Listening makes it possible for us to follow. And following makes it possible for us to listen." Makes good sense to me.

My prayer for us all is that God would open our ears to listen for the Good Shepherd's call so we can continue on our discipleship journey.  
AMEN

Christ is Risen. . . . He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Opps. I feel compelled to tell my very favorite most story. Sorry if you remember it from years ago. But here goes!

A mother was concerned about her kindergarten son walking to school. He didn't want his mother to walk with him. She wanted to give him the feeling that he had some independence but yet know that he was safe. So, she had an idea of how to handle it. She asked a neighbor if she would please follow him to school in the mornings, staying at a distance, so he probably wouldn't notice her. She said that since she was up early with her toddler anyway, it would be a good way for them to get some exercise as well, so she agreed.

The next school day, the neighbor and her little girl set out following behind Timmy as he walked to school with another neighbor girl he knew. She did this for the whole week. As the two walked and chatted, kicking stones and twigs, Timmy's little friend noticed the same lady was following them, as she seemed to do every day all week. Finally, she said to Timmy, 'Have you noticed that lady following us to school all week? Do you know her?' Timmy nonchalantly replied, 'Yeah, I know who

she is.' The little girl said, 'Well, who is she?' 'That's just Shirley Goodnest,' Timmy replied, 'and her daughter Marcy.' 'Shirley Goodnest?' Who the heck is she and why is she following us?

'Well,' Timmy explained, 'every night my Mum makes me say the 23rd Psalm with my prayers, 'cuz she worries about me so much. And in the Psalm, it says, 'Shirley Goodnest and Marcy shall follow me all the days of my life', so I guess I'll just have to get used to it!'

May Shirley Goodnest and Marcy be with you today and always! AMEN