

Fourth Sunday of Easter - May 3, 2020 - Saint David's, Halifax NS

Readings: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

Call to Worship:

The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. [Psalm 23:1-3a]

Prayer:

We are blessed, O God of Life,

that on Sunday, the day of resurrection,

you raised Jesus from death.

In him we find eternal life.

In Jesus you make all things new.

We praise and adore you.

May we, who are witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, live his risen life.

We rejoice this day and celebrate as your people;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day 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, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

John 10:1-10

“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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Reflection:

It sometimes seems as if the thief is in charge:

Stealing health and lives, freedom and companionship, employment and community gatherings during a time of pandemic. . .

Stealing spouses and parents, children and siblings, friends and neighbours through a murderous rampage. . . .

Stealing dedicated lives in the crash of a military helicopter. . . .

Stealing land and safety from millions in the world through conflict and environmental degradation and greed. . . .

Stealing our own peace of mind through grief, worry, illness. . . .

It is hard especially in these tragic and worrisome days to shake off the feeling that the forces that steal and kill and destroy--human or otherwise--have the upper hand. In the face of despair and death and devastation all around and within, we may wonder whether the Bible that talks about hope and life and joy is in touch with reality. Is it not just so much wistful thinking, illusion, cheery promises to mask the pain, to make us feel better?

But a close reading of the Bible reveals that it is not divorced from reality:

The Book of the Acts describes the early church as knowing and including people in need and shaping its life to ensure they are cared for.

The Psalmist experiences the valley of the shadow and its threats, and has been in the presence of enemies.

And Jesus speaks of thieves and bandits--unidentified but characterized by their actions: manipulation for personal gain, willingness to use violence to get their way, exploitation of the vulnerable. In the context of the community of faith, they may be unscrupulous leaders and false teachers who are more concerned about pride, power and pocketbook than about truth, reconciliation and compassionate service in the name of Christ. But beyond that the "thieves and bandits" are the principalities and powers, often unseen like a virus, often unthinkable like planned evil, always dreaded like sudden death--the forces of this world that rob us of hope, joy, freedom and peace.

The Bible arises from and describes and lives in the real world of brokenness and pain, failure and fear. And to that world--our world--it offers the possibility of healing, comfort, new beginnings and grace. In contrast to the "thief"--whatever its manifestation--who comes to steal, kill and destroy, Jesus comes from God to give life, and to give it *abundantly*.

What does this abundant life look like? There are clues in our Scripture readings for today.

The first is in the context for Jesus' words in John's Gospel. They come right after the healing of the blind man. For that man, who has been on the fringes of society, dependent on others and yet isolated, abundant life includes not just the new ability to see but to understand and to grow in relationship with others and especially with Jesus and in community with Jesus' followers. Never again will he wonder where his next meal is coming from or who will answer his pleas as he sits begging outside the city. He will know the safety and security of belonging. *Abundant life is freedom, light, companionship, trust in the goodness of God.*

The second clue is in the Book of the Acts where the believers experience abundant life in devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread together and prayers, in selling possessions and using the proceeds to ensure that no one is in need, in sharing meals with glad and generous hearts, in praising God and enjoying the company of one another. *Abundant life is worship, loving God and loving neighbour, gratitude and community.*

A third clue is found in Psalm 23. We know well that the Psalm describes the life of well-being, trust and provision at the hands of a gracious God. The Lord as Shepherd is there always to guide, nurture, protect, accompany through dangerous times, lead toward safety and peace. *Abundant life is reliance on this faithful God who provides all we need.*

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." This is Jesus' mission, God's purpose for all peoples and the whole creation. Abundant life is defined by release from whatever is robbing us and the world of God's intentions for us. And while we are invited into this life as individuals, we cannot know abundant life in isolation and we cannot know it fully until all of God's children are able to experience it.

To be clear, abundant life is *not* the prosperity gospel--"believe in Jesus and God will make you rich"--a far too prevalent distortion of Scripture making the rounds.

Abundant life is emphatically not about greed but about ensuring and realizing the common good. The abundant life which is Jesus' gift is realized and enjoyed only when shared with all.

We are learning in these days, if we did not know it before, just how interconnected we are and how our well-being depends on others and how our actions affect the safety of others. The only way we can stay safe and hasten the day when the covid-19 virus is no longer in charge is to remember that we are in this together.

As the people of a generous and loving Creator, we have both the mandate and the motivation to see what is robbing God's children and God's creatures of life--and then to stand together against those forces so that all might have life in abundance. Through prayer and praise, teaching and learning, companionship and mutual support, glad generosity toward others and trust in God who provides all we need, we are empowered to live--and to share--abundant life, resurrection life.

The good news is--the thief doesn't win after all. The God of abundant life wins and that glorious truth can shape who we are and all that we do even and especially during difficult and sad times. Easter is the victory of life over death and the things of death in Jesus Christ. We are witnesses of Jesus' resurrection. So in every way we can, let us live this resurrection hope to the glory of God, for our own well-being and that of our neighbour, and for the liberation of the world.

Amen. Thanks be to God for the good news of the gospel.

Prayer:

Loving God, you are like a shepherd to your people,
bringing us to green pastures, leading us beside still waters;

restoring our souls, our lives, and giving us strength.
We give you thanks and praise.

We pray for all the lost sheep of the world –
people who are poor and put upon;
people without adequate food, water or shelter;
people who worry about their children's safekeeping and their parents' future;
people who are affected by the covid-19 pandemic, suffering illness or grief, overwork and
exhaustion, anxiety and fear, the great responsibility of decision-making;
people in Fort MacMurray who are struggling with flood waters;
people who are grieving the loss of loved ones, especially thinking of the families of the 22
victims of the Nova Scotia shooting, and the families of those lost in the helicopter crash.

So much of life seems unfair, O God.
Adjust the balances and set things right, we pray,
so that the wealth of the earth and the delight of knowing your love may fill every life,
may fill the earth,
and cause all your creatures on earth and the whole host of heaven
to raise their hearts and voices in joyful praise to you,
and to your son Jesus, and to your Spirit, one God forever.

We offer these and all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, our
loving Saviour. Amen.

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you.
Amen.*