

May 7, 2017 • Fourth Sunday of Easter • Holy Communion



“A Sense of Awe”

Homily by Rev. Patricia Farris

Psalm 23

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. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The season of Easter pulses with the joy of God's astonishing blessings in the resurrection of Christ. On this Fourth Sunday of the season, the passage we just heard from the Book of Acts brings this snapshot of the early church. We begin to see the impact of the power of resurrection not just on a few individuals—Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the disciples on the road to Emmaus---but on the whole gathered community. And wow! What a picture it is. Talk about the power of transformation! The rejoicing of God's people bubbles over with wonder and awe for all the gifts of a gracious and good God

Christ is Risen—HE IS RISEN INDEED!--and that changes everything and everyone. They devoted themselves to study and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. They took care of everyone, sharing what they had so that none would have need. Their hearts were joyful and generous, and filled with a sense of awe. Awe—at the power and the love and the life-giving presence of all that God had done in Christ Jesus. Everything changes through the gracious, generous, generative love of God.

These early believers had put two-and-two together, we might say. They knew in their bones, in their heart of hearts, that the Risen Christ is the Good Shepherd, who tends and guards and protects. They grasped that the One who has been raised up is the One who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows and leads from death to life. For Christians, this is the deepest promise of Easter--that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ, as Paul put it. God's face is shining upon all in Eastertide, in our darkness as in our light. God is blessing us all.

And that changes everything—not just what we believe, but how we live day in and day out. We claim a radically God-centered perspective for all our daily activities—eating, sharing, praying, studying, seeking assurance and security, making it through tough times—everything about our life is rooted and grounded and borne in the arms of our loving Savior and Good Shepherd. As Rev. Shelby so often said: we are people of the resurrection. Through and through. We are people of the resurrection.

This is the deepest longing of the human heart: to know with assurance the loving, living, abiding presence of God.

Worship is the time and the place where we come together in the presence of our living God to remember this love, to hear the ancient stories, to rest in the stillness and the awe, and to be refreshed and renewed. So many of you have told me that worship is the gift of the one time in the week when you can be still, get grounded, find peace.

Now, I know that we can worship God anywhere—in nature, in Simkins Hall, in a school auditorium as some new congregations do. I know—but I am also so grateful for this beautiful sanctuary. Just walking in the door brings us into the presence of God, helps us center, helps us remember—the architecture, the wood, the light, the cross, the windows. Many of you have also told me how very much you have appreciated Ron Theile's reflections on our stained-glass windows in each issue of our Sentinel newsletter. They're all available on-line on our website in case you've missed one or two.

Last May, Ron wrote a piece on the window up in the balcony, noting that it is based on a verse from the Gospel of John: “I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep.”

Ron wrote: "Symbolically, this window offers the viewer many messages as pertaining to our Christian faith. The artist truly captured what was to be the centerpiece of the wall above the balcony as well as serve as the window that faces off the front of our church on 11th Street."

You know, the choir and I can see it well each Sunday—most of you will want to take a moment after church today and look up and take it in. Look and you will see a gentle Jesus, carrying his shepherd's crook, cradling a lamb in his arm. They are in a lush, verdant place, where the water is still. His red robe signifies humanity, life on earth, the blood of the martyrs. The white robe signifies resurrection and the light of heaven. The sheep at his feet looks up to his face with a look of trust and peace. Christ is calm, strong, God's promise in whom we trust. At night, this window is lighted from within so that the Good Shepherd shines out upon our neighborhood with love and compassion.

Ron offers another perspective for us to consider as well. He wrote:

"Please allow me to offer a simpler view of this magnificent glass. To me, it symbolizes a Christ who not only cares for his flock located within the window, but also watches over his flock as it gathers in our sanctuary. He is watching over us as we worship, pray, sing, and celebrate new life and the passing onto the next. When we need Him most, He will lift us into His arms and wrap His robe around us to offer us the hope that, through Him, everything will be made right. "I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep." This window offers a message of hope," Ron wrote, "so that we can be the hope."

Ron's words bring together all that we celebrate this morning---the love, the assurance, the truly awesome-ness of our God in Christ Jesus, a power that celebrates new life and makes everything whole and changes how we live. A power that fills us up, shines into our hearts and out into the street. A power that restores our hope and confidence in such a way that, through us, will make all the difference beyond the life of the church itself in the world God so loves.

In a few moments, we will gather at the table of our Risen Lord to feel him near in the breaking and sharing of bread. May this be the prayer of our hearts as we come, and as we prepare to go forth from this time of worship:

Nourished at this table, O God, may we know Christ's redemptive love and live a new life in him. Help us who recognize our Lord in the breaking of bread to see and serve him in all whose lives are broken. Give us who are fed at his hand grace to share our bread with the hungry and with the hungry of heart. Keep us faithful in your service. In Christ's name we pray, AMEN.