

## **May 8, 2022 - Easter 4**

### **Litany of Resurrection**

P - God has come into our void,  
C - Filling our hearts with love.  
P - God has embraced our pain,  
C - Filling our hearts with hope.  
P - God has even entered our death,  
C - Filling our hearts with life.  
P - Christ is risen!  
C - Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

### **Prayer of the Day**

O God of peace, you brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep. By the blood of the eternal covenant, make us complete in everything good that we do your will, and work among us that which is well pleasing in your sight, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

### **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.

### **Sermon**

One of my favourite authors, which I always seem to go back to, is C.S. Lewis. He was a British author in the first half of the 20th century, and wrote quite a few books on Christian faith.

One of his most well known books is called Mere Christianity. “Mere” in this case does not mean small or insignificant, but refers to the core, the central parts. He was trying to write about those aspects of the faith which all Christians share, the portions we have in common and on which we can all pretty much agree.

The title of one chapter of this book, which is towards the end of the book is, “Is Christianity easy or hard?”

I think most of us can agree that the only possible answer to this question is, “Yes”!

It’s pretty easy to *become* a Christian. You simply have to have some water splashed on you, and have the words of promise spoken over you. Easy peasy!

However, *being* a Christian is anything *but* easy. As C.S. Lewis reminds us, the whole point of Christian faith is to be the process of making us into Christ. As Luther said, we are to be Christ to our neighbours. That’s the whole purpose of Christianity.

So everything we do, *as* the Christian church, is to enable us and encourage us on the journey to becoming more Christ-like. Whether that’s worship on Sunday, Bible study during the week, prayers before going to bed, donating food to the food bank, going to work, chatting with the lady across the street, or anything else; it’s all about gradually becoming more Christ-like.

*And*, Lewis says, we are called to turn *away* from anything that is getting in the way of our becoming more Christ-like, even if those things are not bad in themselves. If our church building is getting in the way of becoming more Christ-like, it has to go. If our worship books, or our clergy, or our committees, or even the Bible itself is keeping us from loving and serving our neighbour in the name of Christ, then they need to go.

And that's the case for more than just religious "stuff." Habits, ways of thinking, lifestyle choices made years ago, are all subject to the same standard. All these things, which we have grown to like, and even rely on, can be getting in our way.

This is where following Jesus can be really hard. Because following Jesus takes us into places we would rather not go, and forces us to re-evaluate pretty much everything about who we are. And we don't want to do that! It *certainly* doesn't come naturally. It takes a lot of work, and a lot of patience, and a lot of reflection, and a lot of repentance and a lot of starting over. And over. And over.

So. Is Christianity easy or hard? Yes!

And that's the case for today as well. Even this 4th Sunday of the Easter season, on which we remember the Jesus as the Good Shepherd, can be both comfort and challenge at the same time.

We *think* of the image of shepherd as being a comfort. We *think* it's all about being taken care of, and being sheltered, and being led to safety. We read the 23rd Psalm together, and bask in those wonderful images and promises of still waters and green fields and right paths.

But even here, in the Psalm that is read at funerals in order to give comfort, even here, it is hard. Because that table that is being prepared for us is being set up "in the presence of our enemies." All of those people we'd rather not see, all of those habits we'd just as soon ignore, all of those assumptions we'd rather not examine, all of those expectations about how life is supposed to be, are also at that table. In fact, all of those things that are getting in the way of our becoming more Christ-like *have to be* at that table that is being prepared for us, *so that* they can be revealed for what they are, so that we can admit, and even embrace, the discomfort that comes from that acknowledgment, and in that uncomfortable process, be changed a little bit more... into being more Christ-like.

Because it is precisely here, where it is most difficult, that we discover the depth of the promise. It is precisely here, at this table where we find ourselves surrounded by our enemies, in this valley where we are surrounded by the shadow of death, that we are reminded that we are not alone with them. This is where the Good Shepherd is found. This is where the Good Shepherd finds us. This is where the Good Shepherd takes us by the hand, and says, "I am here, and you are mine."

Is Christianity easy or hard? Yes! It's easy, because it is a gift, a free gift, given by the God who is love. It is impossibly hard, because it is also the process by which we are unmade. It is easy, because it is God who makes us Christ-like. It is impossibly hard, because our neighbour is made the centre of our universe; we are no longer the focus of our lives.

Ultimately following Jesus is hard, because it inevitably leads to death. Ultimately following Jesus is easy, because we do not go there alone. The Good Shepherd, who has already gone through that valley and come out the other side, goes with us. So even when it is hard, we proclaim that Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

### **Prayers of the People**

Celebrating the new life we have received, we offer our prayers for our world, our neighbours, and ourselves.

[*Short pause*]

A - Good shepherd, your loving care is extended to all, yet we divide and separate and turn our backs.

Help us to follow Jesus, that all may experience your welcome. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Good shepherd, your creation provides enough for all, yet many are hungry. Help us to follow Jesus, that all may be fed. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Good shepherd, you invite us to take the path of reconciliation and peace, yet we continue to go our own way, at the expense of those around us. Help us to follow Jesus, that our interactions may bring understanding and harmony. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Good shepherd, your church has been called to proclaim forgiveness, and live out your acceptance; yet we have too often let anxiety dictate our actions. Help us to follow Jesus, that we may let go of fear, and embrace your hurting world. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Good shepherd, you promise to accompany those who walk through the valleys of illness, injustice, addiction and fear. Help us to follow Jesus, that we, *too*, may offer our accompaniment to those we name before you.

*[Long pause]*

God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Good shepherd, you promise goodness and mercy for all of our days. Help us to follow Jesus, that our awareness of your presence may increase, and that we may walk in your ways our whole life long. God who leads us into life,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - We offer these prayers, and the prayers we carry in our hearts, trusting in your abundant and ever-present mercy; through Jesus Christ our living Lord.

C - Amen